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SEXY AMBIGUITY AND CIRCULATING SEXUALITY: ASSEMBLAGE, DESIRE, AND  
REPRESENTATION IN SEBA AL-HERZ'S *THE OTHERS*

by

KRISTYN JOHNSON

Under the Direction of Amira Jarmakani, PhD

ABSTRACT

Sexual representations in Seba al-Herz's Saudi Arabian novel *The Others* span various kinds of sexual identification and experience. Surface level readings of the novel find examples of lesbian identities and encounters, but a deeper, more nuanced examination of the novel unearths a complex set of queer desires, practices, sexual encounters, and relationships that do not fit neatly in to regulated sexual identity categories. Through literary analysis, I argue that through ambiguities in the novel's construction and narration, and through the Narrator's sexual experiences, *The Others* offers a kind of sexual expression that opens up possibilities of de-territorializing and re-territorializing sexual experience beyond static identity labels.

INDEX WORDS: Sexuality, Assemblage, Lesbian, Same-gender desire, Narrative analysis

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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May 2015

**DEDICATION**

For my father,  
whose unwavering belief in me has always pushed me to new places.

Hey dad, I wrote a thing. Wanna read it?

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Early on in Seba al-Herz's novel *The Others*, the Narrator tries to name the sexual desires she is feeling. She explores homosexual listservs and chatrooms and searches terms on Google, but she finds that these places give her more questions than answers. The Narrator describes:

I read all the pages the Google search engine would give me when I typed in the English words *homosexual* and *bisexual*. The pages that came up made my head hurt. I felt as though they were forcing upon me an awareness, an acknowledgment, of an orientation that was not really mine. And yet the pages that came up on the screen when I searched for the Arabic equivalent, *al-mithliyya al-jinsiyya*, all veered from *tahrim* to *tajrim*, interdiction to criminalization. That would drive me to close the window before I could even finish reading .... Finally, I resorted to my own thought processes. No doubt, here was where all of the answers were, in my own body. (al-Herz, 22-23)

The Narrator's questions about her sexuality and her discomfort with taking up a "homosexual" identity open up questions about the usefulness of a named homosexual identity. The existence of such questions within the novel opens up opportunities to explore named sexual identities versus sexual desires and experiences. The novel enables a space to consider the various relationships the Narrator has with women and men, and what potentials those relationships open up about desire, identity, and sexual possibility.

Through a critical analysis of *The Others*, I explore how sexuality is presented in the novel, and how it is named and codified at some moments yet fluid and ambiguous at others. In an effort to understand the usefulness of the self being presented through stable identities and representations, I first consider the Narrator herself. Through an analysis of the Narrator as a narrative source, and through an investigation of her relationships and her body, I consider the impossibility of the Narrator maintaining a stable self, and by extension a static self and sexuality. From this analytic point, I examine expressions of same-gender desire and its manifestations throughout the novel as sexual identity, sexual encounters, and sometimes a combination of both.

In order to explore these questions, I engage with discussions of sexual identity categories within the contexts of sexuality-as-stable-identity, which mark sexual identity as an ever-present and immutable part of the self. As an alternative to the concept of named sexual identity, my project investigates the theoretical discourses of sexuality-assemblage. Under the theoretical framework of sexuality-assemblage, the coming together of bodies (where not just human bodies, but anything can be a body) is formed through what those bodies do with each other. Through this analytic lens, sexuality may be expressed as fluid and undetermined experiences and encounters that do not have to lead to a static identity.

The novel I analyze is Seba al-Herz's novel *The Others*. This novel follows the Narrator, a 22-year-old university student in Saudi Arabia, as she explores several relationships with both women and men. As the story unfolds, the Narrator has sexual encounters with four people: Dai, a fellow female college student; Dareen, a woman she meets at a party; Rayyan, a man she meets online; and Umar, a male friend and the Narrator's final romantic partner. While the novel explores her long affairs with Dai and Dareen, the Narrator rarely expresses an interest in sharing the details of those relationships with others nor does she show an interest in claiming the sexual identity of "lesbian." *The Others* takes an approach to sexuality that is less concerned with identity and instead explores the physical and emotional bonds the Narrator shares with women and men more in terms of the parameters and possibilities of their relationships and how the Narrator navigates those possibilities. The novel's depiction of sexual encounters as situational and experiential is of critical importance to my research questions because of the potentials it opens up for exploring sexuality as experience rather than identity.

### Research Questions:

The Research Questions that frame my investigation and analysis are:

- 1: Does the Narrator's understanding of and control over her actions and body validate or challenge questions about the possibility of a stable, coherent self?
- 2: How does the ambiguous narrative style of the novel disrupt understandings of stable, chronological storytelling within the novel-form?
- 3: What are the productive possibilities of sexuality-assemblage in the novel?
- 4: How can sexuality-assemblage be an alternative to sexual identity categories?

Through my analysis of the novel *The Others*, I have found that the novel's representation of the Narrator, her narrative style, and her relationship to her body suggests the impossibility of maintaining a stable self-subject formation and bring into question the desirability of such stable subject forms. The narrative style, with its incoherencies and ambiguities around coherent time, relationships, and self-body relations, also challenges and disrupts normative understandings of self-narration and selfhood. These analytical points around time, partnership, and self which I discuss in Chapter 2, support the Narrator's expression of sexuality as not always already settled in an identity, which I explore in Chapter 3. Through the analytical framework of sexuality-assemblage, the Narrator's sexual experiences are presented as desires and encounters that do not have to be attributed to a specific quality of the self. While the Narrator's sexuality is still codified and subjected at moments to social master scripts of stability and normativity, sexuality-assemblage also gives way to alternatives for her to move around those scripts.

## 1.1 Literature Review

### 1.1.1 Western Sexual Identity Constructions

In order to investigate conceptions of modern sexual identities and representations, it is first important to consider how sexual identities have been constructed and expressed in Western locations, given the cultural and ideological spread and adoption of those constructions throughout various parts of the world. Michel Foucault (1976) credits the first articulations of homosexuality as an identity to an article published by Carl Westphal in 1870 (Foucault, 43). Foucault argues that, “homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphrodism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (Foucault, 43). John D’Emilio (1983) situates the emergence of homosexuality as an identity category less within specific dates, but rather within a larger time frame. D’Emilio links homosexual identity within the United States to the growth of capitalism. As he explains, “it has been the historical development of capitalism – more specifically, its free labor system – that has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women, and to organize politically on the basis of that identity” (D’Emilio, 102). While same-gender relations occurred prior to the introduction of specific homosexual identity categories, the use of terms such as “gay” and “lesbian” have allowed for a different kind of visibility and organizing (D’Emilio).

While some individuals may consider sexual identity as a particular articulation of the self, other individuals in the gay and lesbian community have used their sexual identities as a focal point for creating a more prominent public and social profile. For some, gay and lesbian

identities “can be seen as a public sign of the articulation of a distinct identity organized around same-sex desires” (Weeks, 138). As gay and lesbian individuals publicly declare their sexual orientation, they become a part of the larger public, social movement. Gay and lesbian collective identities often position themselves in political movements working to end discrimination based on sexual orientation. Through this analytical lens, “the emergence of a gay liberation can thus be seen as a collective demand for full equality” (Weeks, 139). Many identity categories function through the recognition of difference, and gay and lesbian sexual identities hinge on this framework as much as any other. To be gay or lesbian is to not be heterosexual.

However, such a distinction between heterosexual and homosexual creates a false separation between those who are gay and those who are not. This false dichotomy based on sexual identity ignores the various ways race, class, gender, and ethnicity (among other identities) impact one’s association with and declaration of a sexual identity. As Cathy Cohen (2005) argues in her critique of queer politics, many of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people of color she has interacted with have expressed their interpretation of “queer” as a “term rooted in class, race, and gender privilege. For us, ‘queer’ is a politics based on narrow sexual dichotomies that make no room either for analysis of oppression of those we might categorize as heterosexual, or for the privilege of those who operate as ‘queer’” (Cohen, 36). Her argument highlights that if someone feels pressured (by society, community, friends, or whomever) to identify with a primary sexual identity, then this ignores the various ways race, ethnicity, class, and gender are influencing that sexual identity in potentially privileged and oppressive ways. The interconnection of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality has great significance when considering sexual identity constructions in Middle Eastern contexts and will be explored more extensively in the next section of my literature review.

Stitched to the framework of Western sexual identities is the coming out narrative. If the terms gay and lesbian are adopted as relevant signifiers of homosexual identity within the context of Western countries, then a large defining characteristic of that identity is a “new willingness on the part of homosexual people to openly affirm their sexual identities (‘coming out’)” (Weeks, 138). Within the United States and other Western countries, coming out has gained traction as an important part of identifying as a gay or lesbian person, holds sway as significant through narratives of coming out that argue its benefits as a way to openly express and talk about one’s sexual identity with family, friends, co-workers, and so on, in order to maintain an “authentic” life and relationships.

However, as critical discourse around coming out has begun to see such narratives of coming out as oversimplified, other conversations about coming out have emerged. Eve Sedgwick (2008) describes coming out as a set of performative speech acts which have less to do with an individual and his/her understanding of the self than with some kind of spoken declaration that may, in fact, already be known (Sedgwick, 3-4). In an example of a man coming out to a friend who already knew he was gay, Sedgwick explains, “what constituted coming out for this man, in this situation, was to use about himself the phrase ‘coming out’ ...” (Sedgwick, 4). Such an act of coming out, Sedgwick continues, is not meant to do the “constative work of reporting that s/he *is* out, but the performative work of coming out in the first place” (Sedgwick, 4). Viewed in this light, coming out has less to do with living an “authentic” life. Rather, coming out is absorbed into the discursive construction of a declared homosexual identity such that the act of coming out becomes a performative component that reinstates the validity of identity categories in a way that compels gay and lesbian individuals to accept those categories and be signified within them in order to be intelligible.

Yet even as a performative act, the coming out process retains a great deal of power and influence. Judith Roof (1996) argues that this power is linked to the coming out narrative's location within larger cultural narratives. Roof is critical of the coming out narrative, arguing that its emphasis on producing an outside identity that matches the inside reinforces "heteronarrative" understandings of "sexuality as an underlying cause" (Roof, 106). Roof argues that in the process of the lesbian coming out story, "heteronarrative's emphasis on identity exhibits and contains her desire at the very moment the lesbian's self-affirmation would presumably free her from heterosexual expectations" (Roof, 107). Posing the question of why the coming out narrative is so pleasing, even as it reproduces dominant cultural logics, Roof offers an explanation that "Perhaps part of its attractiveness is its familiarity; comforting because it fits into traditional story patterns, the coming out story seems both radical and liberatory because its conventional pattern has apparently been mustered in the service of something called a gay or lesbian identity" (Roof, 107). She continues that this familiarity and "natural affirmation makes the coming out story seem positive, inevitable, and immensely satisfying" (Roof, 107), even when for some people it is none of those things.

A major concern, then, that exists around coming out is that those individuals who choose not to come out publicly may be shunned for "being afraid to tell the truth" or "being ashamed of who they really are." Through a false dichotomy between those who have come out and those who have not, a hierarchy begins to be established. Such a binary is problematic, because "when coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication of responsibility, or, the act of somebody who is disempowered or somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness" (Rasmussen, 146). Thus, those who do come out are seen as champions of the gay and lesbian movement who can now live authentic, open lives, while those who do not come



out are viewed as shameful, disempowered individuals who cannot fully participate in collective gay and lesbian identity movements. The notion of someone being gay or lesbian becomes intermingled with a necessity to come out, as “dominant discourses relating to lesbian and gay politics tend to offer no moral alternative BUT to come out” (Rasmussen, 146).

The problem with this dominant discourse that makes coming out an imperative is that it ignores the various reasons why a person may choose not to come out. Eve Sedgwick contends that while there is an assumption of a connection between gender and sexuality, “some dimensions of sexuality might be tied, not to gender, but *instead* to differences or similarities of race or class” (Sedgwick, 31). Mary Lou Rasmussen (2004) similarly argues that there are other associations to consider beyond gender and sexuality, suggesting that “people’s relationship to the closet and coming out is affected by [other] factors such as race and age” (Rasmussen, 147). These arguments about the complex relationships around race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are deeply connected to the complicated translation of the coming out narrative within transnational contexts. While I am not discussing the coming out narrative explicitly in my analysis of the novel, a discussion and consideration of the usefulness and practicality of the coming out narrative is significant to understanding sexual possibility and intelligibility within the socio-cultural context of the Middle East.

#### 1.1.2 Sexuality Studies in the Middle East:

Within the various conversations happening in discourses about homosexuality in the Middle East, there are two specific fields of analysis that I am focusing on. While each of these conversations is complex and multilayered, they can very generally be collected in to two discursive groups: those who register same-gender relations as an expression of sexual identity

that appears similar to Western constructions as named and static, and those who view same-gender relations as a more diffuse expression of sexual experience and desire that is situational and temporal. Samar Habib's (2007) discussion of female homosexuality in Middle Eastern literature exists within the first conversation of recognizing sexual relations as an identity. Habib considers homosexuality to be a piece of the human condition that exists both transhistorically and transnationally, arguing that texts such as Ahmad Ibn Yusuf Tifashi's thirteenth century text *Nuzhat al-Albab* "reveals that there can be no doubt as to the existence of female homosexuality, *at least* as a category, in the premodern Arabian imagination" (S. Habib, 4).

Habib does recognize that gay and lesbian identities as we recognize them today did not exist prior to their articulation as such identities. As she explains, "it would seem more logical to fathom that such people [homosexuals] *did* exist but *for whom contemporary gay semiotics and epistemology was nonexistent* [sic]. But one cannot rob these individuals of the most basic conscious knowledge of themselves as different from the dictates of standard social sexual currency" (S. Habib, 25). Habib continues her argument by stating that while historians of sexuality should be aware of their own foreign location within sexual history, "it is still possible to refer to 'homosexuality' and 'gayness' according to the terms of a monolithic language – as a single set of pronouns, nouns and adjectives – which suffice in a comprehensive and generalist approach to the study of human sexuality" (S. Habib, 27). Although Habib's examples here are specifically related to past sexual histories and stories, her arguments are still pertinent to my present investigation of modern sexuality because her theoretical framework relies on a universalized language of female sexuality that I am arguing is too totalizing to reflect the varied ways that female sexuality may be experienced and expressed.

The visibility of lesbian sexual identity is also important to the arguments of her book. While analyzing Tifashi's *Nuzhat al-Albab*, she notes that when describing a woman and her lover, Tifashi "chooses the word 'witness' which is indelible from the visibility it implies.... The wealthy woman in this account is *seen* and reproached and blamed by the people (presumably her neighbors and family and friends) *for her irrational spending on her lover and not at all for the gender of her love interest*" (S. Habib, 72). Habib deems the visibility of lesbian sexuality vitally important and commends the novel *I Am You*, published in Beirut in 2000 for expanding that visibility: "The proliferation of positive, or at least realistic, representations of individuals of deviant sexuality and gender, assists those individuals in *coming to terms* with their own sexual identities. *I Am You*'s triumph is to be found in its audacity to name the nameless," Habib explains (S. Habib, 107). Thus, just as Western sentiments of homosexual identity link sexuality and identity signification (frequently through coming out), Habib also validates those ways of experiencing same-gender relations in the Middle East. While I disagree with her argument that female homosexuality and lesbian identity are universal sexual categories that can be applied across time and space, understanding her interpretation of Middle Eastern literary texts is crucial to my own ambitions of literary analysis, given that I am investigating female representations of sexuality that move beyond identity categories in a Middle Eastern novel.

Yet even as scholars like Habib argue for the applicability of identitarian homosexuality in the Middle East, there are others who argue that the terms "gay" and "lesbian" are problematic within that context. Joseph Massad (2007), for example, in his book *Desiring Arabs*, analyzes a phenomenon that he titles the "Gay International" (Massad, 161), which is Western international gay and lesbian organizations that are, as he views it, imposing Western ideas of homosexuality, identity, and political agendas on to Middle Eastern countries in a manner that amounts to

cultural imperialism. Massad views gay and lesbian sexual identities as strictly Western constructs that do not fit with the homosexual practices of Middle Eastern gay men (gay women are largely left out of his argument).

Massad explains that the Gay International seeks to transform Arab and Muslim men from “practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’” (Massad, 162). He sees this transformation as extremely detrimental to Middle Eastern communities because he views this imposition as an alteration of the previously existing sexual practices of Middle Eastern men, who may engage in same-sex relations, but who do not publicly identify as “gay.” This identification, Massad explains, is the cause of increased homophobia and social policing in the Middle East. In a discussion of a police crackdown on gay men in Egypt, Massad states “it is not same-sex sexual practices that are being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek” (Massad, 183). Ultimately, Massad claims that the “Gay International is destroying social and sexual configurations of desire in the interest of reproducing a world in its own image” (Massad, 189). He sees the spread of Western sexual identities as a form of imperialism based on racist, Orientalist views of Middle Eastern cultures as backward and repressive and needing Western assistance to progress in to “modern” societies.

While Massad recognizes that cultural ideas about identity and subjectivity may travel across cultural and national borders, he argues that such transnational ideological movements are a form of cultural imperialism. Identity categories like gay and lesbian may have originated in a Western context, but they have migrated transnationally to non-Western locations where they may be taken up and re-structured to have different meanings. With this in mind, some LGBTQ

activists find the conversation about whether or not gay and lesbian identities are appropriate to be irrelevant. Haneen Maikey of Al-Qaws (a Palestinian LGBTQ organization) expresses her opinion that “at this point the discourse of ‘sexual identity’ is already part of our discourse as LGBTQ Palestinian activists, whether is it a Western concept or not” (Hochberg, 606). Samira Saraya, another lesbian Palestinian activist, echoes these sentiments when she states that sometimes sexuality is described in terms of practices and positions, not identities and lifestyles, “but to that [she adds]: so what? ... Cultures don’t exist in isolation from each other; there is always mobility of ideas, concepts, and terms across cultures” (Hochberg, 606). Thus, while there is much discussion of identity versus practice and Western versus non-Western, there is still the reality that for some individuals, the term “lesbian” is useful. However, it is important to recognize that such usefulness may have different manifestations in the Middle East than in Western countries. Although I agree with Joseph Massad’s claim that same-gender relations in the Middle East may not be indicative of a named sexual identity, I also contend that his designation of sexual identity categories as cultural imperialism is problematic, given that some gay and lesbian individuals find those categories beneficial.

Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) offers a nuanced and complex investigation of same-gender desire in both the past and present. She states her reluctance to place current understandings of sexuality onto earlier sexual representations in history (Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 19). However, Najmabadi explains that while fixed concepts of sexuality may not have existed, “it would be a mistake to think that prior to that time there were no identifications whatsoever by desire type” (Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 19-20). While Samar Habib makes similar claims of the existence of female same-gender desire, the distinction between Habib and Najmabadi lies in their differing views about the application of modern identity categories to

those historically situated desires. Najmabadi explains that while “sexual practices were generally not considered fixed in to lifelong patterns of sexual orientation,” sexual preferences and desire did exist (Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 20). Even though she is writing about sexuality in previous historical contexts, her assertion that there is no universal, ahistorical concept of sexuality is a theoretical point reflected in work by some of the aforementioned scholars (Sedgwick, D’Emilio, Roof, Foucault), and is also a formative concept for this project.

While writing on male-male same sex relations in Iran, Najmabadi argues that “the dominant regime of regulating sexuality has remained centered on practices rather than on inherent forms of desire. No notion of the homosexual as a [human] type ... has emerged as a dominant discourse, neither for disciplinary purposes nor for self-identification” (Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches*, 57). And yet, even as the identity of “homosexual” has remained unproductive for Iranian men, Najmabadi also argues that terms such as “lesbian” are taken up in certain situations. Najmabadi (2014) examines the nature of language and identity terminology when it travels transnationally, asking “in a socio-cultural-historical context in which the dominant narratives of the self are formed differently from that which has become dominant in much of the domain we name the West, how does one understand the seemingly similar emergence of concepts and practices labeled gay, lesbian, or trans?” (Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 9-10). She offers one possible example when describing a scenario of two Iranian women. She explains “the accidental arrival of a self-identified Iranian-American lesbian into their lives allowed them to disavow and resist the locally available designations.... [The identification] *lesbian* allowed her a distinct and satisfying self-recognition. Her partner became *lesbian* because of her location in relation to her” (Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 10).

Ultimately, Najmabadi argues that same-gender practices do not manifest themselves in a static and pervasive identity, but rather become what she calls a kind of “self-in-conduct.” Rather than a self-identity that exists in all locations and situations, Najmabadi finds “a sense of being in the world that is centered on conduct – the situated, contingent, daily performances that depend not on any sense of some essence about one’s body and psyche. Rather it is defined in terms of its specific location and temporal node at the intersection of numerous relations...” (*Professing Selves*, 297). The question of ‘am I a lesbian?’ becomes, for Najmabadi, “a question of not some inner truth but of figuring out and navigating one’s relationship-in-conduct vis-à-vis others” (Najmabadi, *Professing Selves*, 298). Her understanding of same-gender desire and practices as situational and relational, and not necessarily something that must manifest itself in a stable identity, is a fundamental component of my analytical framework for investigating female same-gender relationships in *The Others*. Building off of Najmabadi’s theorizing of sexuality as situational and fluid, I argue that sexuality can be experienced as acts outside of the social understandings of constructed sexual identity categories, and that stable sexual identity is formed through the narrowing of all sexual possibilities into a rigid set of static habits.

### 1.1.3 Queer Representations in Middle Eastern Literature:

Those who have written critically about queer stories and characters in Middle Eastern literature tend to examine gay and lesbian sexuality as a named and immutable identity and have highlighted the ways these stories present homosexual relationships as inferior or deviant. Hanadi al-Samman (2008) argues that modern Arabic literature depicts homoerotic desire as “a substitute, and a deviation of the heterosexual norm, as a symptom of societal and economic degradation, and ultimately as a trope denoting failed national aspirations...” (al-Samman, 277).

She goes on to argue that recent male homosexual literature falls into two categories: the first “represents homosexuality as a byproduct of active/passive, master/slave power relations with local and colonial powers, or as the result of pervasive and exploitive societal practices” (al-Samman, 277). She cites the stories *Beirut’75* (Ghada al-Samman, 1975), *Yacubian Building* (al-Aswany, 2002), and *Midaq Alley* (Mahfouz, 1948) as examples of such gay representations (al-Samman, 277).

The second category of male homosexual literature presents more “sympathetically rendered characters portraying true humane [sic] emotions that focus on the essence of same-sex relations and the individual’s biological difference from heterosexuals” (al-Samman, 277). Al-Samman describes *The Stone of Laughter* (Barakat, 1990) and *I Am You* (Mansur, 2000) as examples that are “successful in tapping into the essence of biological sexual difference” (al-Samman, 277). The author is arguing for an analysis of these texts that situates male homosexuality in one of two ways, either as a type of deviance related to power relations and masculinity or as an embodied and biologically experienced sexual difference (from heterosexuality). While certainly these two approaches are possible critical lenses through which to analyze texts, they are not the only methods. The author argues that these are the two representations of male homosexuality that exist in modern Arabic literature. Yet even if these are the stories that are told, an analysis of these stories could be more complex and nuanced.

Al-Samman’s analysis of female homosexuality in literature contends that female homosexuality is frequently absent as an identity and is instead presented “as a substitute or a prelude to ‘normative’ and everlasting heterosexuality. These lesbian encounters are often experienced as an outlet from excessive patriarchal restrictions or societal gender divisions, or as compensating for husbands who are absent...” (al-Samman, 277-278). Unfortunately, the only



text she analyzes as an example of what she calls this “reductive portrayal” is the novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* (al-Shaykh, 1988) (al-Samman, 297-301). Iman al-Ghafari (2003) reads the female homosexual relations in *Women of Sand and Myrrh* in a similar fashion, stating that in the novel, “lesbian relations are regarded as not chosen out of an innate tendency, but as imposed on women because of the absence of men, or the incapacity of some men to fulfill the sexual desires of women ... Such a perception disregards the fact that lesbianism is, for some women, a desired end and a true expression of their innermost feelings and bodily desires...” (al-Ghafari, 88). Both authors are critical of such lesbian depictions (which are presented as merely a substitute for heterosexual relations) because they view these depictions as a denial of internal and embodied female sexual desire. While their criticism is valid, I would argue that it ignores the varied and complex ways that sexual desire, homosexual or otherwise, may express itself in ways that are unrelated to some internalized part of the self

In contrast to their critique of depictions of female homosexual desire in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, both al-Samman and al-Ghafari praise the novel *I Am You* for its representation of lesbian identity through the character Siham. Al-Ghafari argues that the importance of the novel “is that it brings to light the difference between lesbian desire that stems from the body and the one that stems from feminist politics. The former is seen as authentic, natural, and forthright...” (al-Ghafari, 89). Al-Samman similarly claims that the significance of *I Am You* comes from its representation of lesbian desire as something that comes from internal, embodied motivations. The novel, al-Samman claims, “is perhaps the only contemporary novel in Arabic literature that addresses female homoeroticism from a biological difference standpoint” (al-Samman, 305). She goes on to argue that Siham “undertakes a journey of self-discovery aimed at bringing herself and the people around her, such as her mother, to accept her lesbian identity” (al-Samman, 305).

Again, both of the authors situate homosexual desire as something inherent to the individual and deeply linked to the body (and separate from heterosexual desires) and is fundamentally associated with the self and self-identification.

Perhaps an analysis more closely linked to what I hope to do is Dina Georgis's (2013) critical reading of *Bareed Mista3jil*, a collection of anonymous, true stories by queer women in Lebanon. Although she frames her analysis of the work around investigations of queer pride and shame, Georgis ultimately argues that the queer women and transgender individuals represented in the stories "are cultivating and negotiating their sexualities under a variety of local and geopolitical pressures. Their stories help us to begin thinking about how queer Arab becoming is postcolonial: mixed, complexly hybrid, and unfinished" (Georgis, 234). Later, Georgis concludes that her intention with the article is to ask "us to make conceptual room for sexualities lived in between East and West, lived in process and not yet fully conceived" (Georgis, 248). While I take issue with parts of her analysis, her argument that sexuality should be conceived of as a process of becoming is similar to the analysis I do through the theoretical frameworks of sexuality-assemblage and literary analysis.

## 1.2 Methodology and Methods

I chose to analyze only one novel for several reasons. One reason is that there are not many novels about female same-gender relationships set in the Middle East that have been written or translated into English. Moreover, of the novels that are in English, fewer still explore sexuality as anything other than identity. Most of the novels depict same-gender relations as a static identity category. *The Others* is therefore unique in its exploration of sexuality and sexual expression. This is not to say that the lesbian identity category is a valid possibility for some Middle Eastern women, and I would argue it is a valid possibility for some of the women the Narrator meets within the story. However, the novel is not solely concerned with representations of lesbian identities. The exploration of other forms of sexuality is of interest to me, as it offers a way to analyze what possibilities sexuality-assemblage can open up as alternatives to sexual identity. Additionally, working with only one novel helps me remain focused on one set of historical and social parameters.

I use literary analysis in order to explore different conceptions of sexuality. While there are many different research avenues that could be taken with these questions (such as anthropological studies, film studies, statistical research, and others), I have chosen to use literature as my basis for several reasons. For one, literature can be a more open and unrestrained place to explore questions of selfhood. While I am studying a literary work of fiction, which is foundationally a fabricated story, fiction still offers a space to explore questions of self-expression and self-representation that individuals in real life might be hesitant to admit or challenge. With literature, there is also access to multiple perspectives. Granted the novel I have chosen is told exclusively from a single point of view, but there are still several characters within the novel whose stories get explored. *The Others* specifically also offers a unique perspective

into how a novel can present different narrative styles, given that this novel does not use quotation marks to indicate dialogue and does not also demarcate what is being spoken and what is being thought.

The two literary frameworks that will guide my analysis are: postmodernism and new historicism. The theoretical framework of postmodernism is foundational to my literary analysis because of the ways that postmodernism deconstructs subjectivity. In postmodern theory, “subjectivity itself is regarded as a product of power structures; power is no longer viewed as an isolable and centralized agency that dominates or coerces subjects that are already there: rather, it is intimately involved in the very production of subjectivities which are then conditioned to regulate themselves” (M. Habib, 248). The destabilization of the subject as an entity that is neither self-contained nor always-already present is central to my arguments about sexuality formations. Following this line of thought, Habib notes that, “postmodernist writing unabashedly exhibits difference, diversity, incoherence, and a world of surfaces, with no attempt to subsume these under identity, a framework of coherence or depth, or any vision of implied unity” (M. Habib, 249). As such, using postmodern literary theory as a framework for my textual analysis allows me to question the subject and identity formations as bounded and stable.

New historicism is integral to my work because of its emphasis on contextualizing a text with a specific temporal and spatial framing. As Hans Bertens explains, under new historicism, “the literary text, then, is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social, and economic dispensation. Far from being untouched by the historical moment of its creation, the literary text is directly involved in history” (Bertens, 176-177). Approaching my textual analysis through the framework of new historicism, I am considering more than just the text itself as an isolated product. Instead, new historicism allows me to situate the novel within the cultural and

social location of its production, as well as to recognize the impact of historically and temporally specific influences. Situating the novel within social, historical, and temporal contexts is significant to my research because it allows me to investigate questions such as the historical and cultural significance of sexual identity categories.

In addition to these literary frameworks of theoretical analysis, I am also using the theoretical lens of sexuality-assemblage. Given my focus on interrogating the uses of stable identity formations, sexuality-assemblage offers a way to reconceptualize the body and sexuality such that sexual encounters can be about more than just bodies and identities. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980) were among the first to conceptualize the idea of assemblage. Applying the theoretical concept of assemblage to sexual encounters and identity has been discussed by Nick J. Fox and Pam Alldred (whose work I am taking the phrase “sexuality-assemblage” from), as well as Jasbir Puar and Craig Osmond. I am utilizing Deleuze and Guattari’s arguments, presented in Elizabeth Grosz’s article “A Thousand Tiny Sexes” (1993), about the subject-body “as a series of flows, energies, movements, capacities, a series of fragments or segments capable of being linked together in ways other than those which congeal it into an identity” (Grosz, 173). To facilitate this idea of the body as unformed flows and intensities, Deleuze and Guattari use the idea of the “Body without Organs” (BwO), which they argue “resists any equation with a notion of identity or property: ‘The BwO is never yours or mine. It is always *a* body’” (Grosz, 175). Theorizing the body as something more (or less) than the sum of its identity-parts allows the body to become a part of the sexuality-assemblage in an undetermined way, such that the human body within the sexuality-assemblage can remain open to the multiplicitous potentials of the assemblage itself.

Jasbir Puar's (2005) thoughts on sexuality-assemblage are also important to my framework, as she explains that "an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency" (Puar, "Queer Times," 128). She further argues that by "displacing queerness as an identity or modality that is visibly, audibly, legibly, or tangibly evident, assemblages allow us to attune to intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities" (Puar, "Queer Times," 128). Although Puar is thinking through queerness-as-identity specifically, her argument can easily be translated to thinking about sexuality-as-identity more generally. Indeed, the usefulness of sexuality-assemblage is found in the ways that the concept of assemblage investigates more than just what is readily seen, heard, or touched. Through its expanded and multiplicitous relations, sexuality-assemblage opens sexuality and sexual desires to greater potentials than a mere sexual identity allows. With these ideas about the subject-body and sexuality in mind, I explore how the sexual encounters in the novel can be interpreted through the framework of sexuality-assemblage. Considering sexual experiences through this theoretical lens opens up the possibility for the Narrator to explore her sexual desires without the pressure of having to codify or give meaning to those experiences within a socio-cultural context. Sexuality-assemblage allows for the possibility of moving beyond identity categories into a more expansive experience of sexuality.

## 2 NOVEL AND NARRATOR: AMBIGUITY AND INCOHERENCE:

The narrative structure and form of *The Others* is unique in several ways, most notably in its ambiguous temporality and unclear narration style. There are no real markers of time in the novel, only tertiary remarks about various characters' ages, but even those are sometimes unclear. Similarly, the style of narration in the novel can also be confusing. There is very little indication of who is talking, no quotation marks around what is dialogue and what is not, leaving the reader to infer and figure out who is speaking in dialogue moments, and when sentences are being spoken versus thought. The lack of boundaries around voices and bodies in the novel is particularly useful to explore since it challenges popular notions of a contained self and subject. Additionally, all but one chapter of the *The Others* is told in a first-person account by the Narrator (the other chapter is from Dai's perspective). This first-person narration leads to questions of how the Narrator represents herself and her relationships across time, and these questions of self-narration lead to complications and disruptions for the possibility of coherent, chronological time and stable self-body subjecthood.

A telling example of such complications comes in one of the Narrator's monologues near the middle of the book. She thinks:

The snow came and the snow went ... twenty times snow came and went. The more grown up I say that I am, the more mature I become, the more I fall back on the sensation that I am only a little girl whose dress the breeze plays with, making it fly.

Life is nothing but a reflection of you, my mother says.... but why is my reflection as contradictory as this? A wounding reflection that sends my face back deformed when I look in my mirrors. (al-Herz, 195).

In these reflections, the Narrator highlights that even as time moves forward, she is constantly "falling back" to the past, or to herself as a girl in the past. Such a statement challenges conventional experiences of time that always compel one in a forward progression. Then she

questions why her reflection in the mirror does not show what she expects to see. The suggestion that a mirror can reflect anything other than “you” or “I” disrupts the normative understandings of the self as stable and immutable. Through these narrative moments of ambiguity and instability, which manifest through the Narrator’s relationships to others and her “self,” the novel and the Narrator show the potential impossibility of coherent temporality and unified mind-body-subject creation.

In this chapter, I explore these impossibilities and ambiguities, first by looking at the shifting temporality that exists in the novel, where past, present, and future are conflated in moments. Also, I examine how queer space and time are expressed through some of the Narrator’s relationships, and how those expressions disrupt normative understandings of linear time and partnerships. Then, I analyze the Narrator and her relationship to her “self,” both in terms of how she is and is not in control of body, as well as how she views her own self-representation. An exploration of the Narrator’s lack of power over her actions at moments, and the disconnect between her expectations for her self-presentation versus what is actually present is significant to understanding the impossibility of maintaining control over a stable subject-self. My argument that *The Others* presents time, relationships, and the Narrator herself as shifting, ambiguous, and incoherent at moments falls in line with my claims in Chapter 3 that sexuality-assemblage is a viable framework for examining the Narrator’s sexuality, because of assemblage’s relationship with fluidity and shifting potential.



## 2.1 Relationships, Time, and Space:

### 2.1.1 Where? What? When?: Time Travel and Definitions

One of the places where we see ambiguity and uncertainty in the novel is in the Narrator's language about the parameters of her relationships. In each of the Narrator's relationships, she expresses varying degrees of uncertainty about what her relationships are, how to describe them, and even when they begin and end. Time is not clearly demarcated in the novel, in general, and it often shifts from present to past with little indication that such a shift has occurred. There are a few instances where a change in time is indicated by a verb tense change, though ironically when she begins to narrate events from the past, she sometimes shifts into present tense. The Narrator's narration of her dead brother Hassan is a common example of these tense shifts. When she is recounting her life around the time of Hassan's death, she explains "I had not wept for Hassan like a proper sister in mourning. I had screamed on and on, Hassan is not leaving me! Hassan is not dying! Touch him, rub him, he just feels chilled, he isn't really stone cold! He is just making fun of us" (al-Herz, 42). The temporal movement to the past narrated through the present tense conflates the past and present, if momentarily. The way that the Narrator speaks and thinks about Hassan throughout the novel suggests that he is always present in her life, even after he has been dead a few years, although the Narrator does not explicitly state how long he has been dead. The bringing forth of past moments into the present achieves, on the one hand, the recognition that the Narrator cannot leave her past behind, nor can she leave the people from her past behind. On the other hand, it disrupts the idea of the past, present, and future as demarcated temporal spaces. If the past can be called to and narrated in the present, then indeed, the past and present may be interchangeable; such a claim in turn

challenges the way we think about time as stable and uni-directional. The shifting temporal spaces also disrupt the traditional way that one imagines the self and subject to exist, as always contained and static. If the Narrator can be pulled between past and present, her subject-self may be more fluid than normative readings of the self allow for.

Given the lack of emphasis on linear time in the novel, it is difficult to gauge how long any of her relationships last. The Narrator's relationship with Rayyan is the most obvious example of this, though all of her relationships exhibit patterns of ambiguity. In the case of Rayyan (a 25 year old man she meets online, who lives in Riyadh), there are questions around both the length of their relationship and the nature of it. The Narrator begins her retelling of their relationship with the sentence, "Rayyan was a story in one chapter" (al-Herz, 229). She means this quite literally, as she only focuses on describing Rayyan and their encounters for a single chapter in the novel. A meta-narrative moment is born here, as the Narrator temporarily steps outside of the events of the story and crosses into the larger language of her own self-narration.

She then steps back in to describing Rayyan and continues, "I do not know which one of us finished with the other one.... We ended slowly, so slowly that I have no idea in what moment we actually did end it. I cannot pinpoint or even guess the time span that framed our relationship. We ended so slowly that it wasn't really an ending" (al-Herz, 229). The lack of definition around the length of their relationship is brought up several times throughout Rayyan's chapter as a kind of curiosity about their relationship, something that the Narrator cannot make sense of. She laments that, "This is the hardest part of it all. I don't know what was wrong. Why did we come to an end? What was the final obstacle on the road that we stumbled over? The hardest thing about it is that I search for the reasons and don't find them, and so I cannot finally or definitively escape him, nor can he truly rid himself of me" (al-Herz, 236). The complication becomes for the

Narrator that not only is she uncertain of when they began and ended, she is also unsure of how or why, which leads her to an inability to completely move out of her time with Rayyan. The result of this is that, similar to her experiences with Hassan noted above, the Narrator's past with Rayyan is temporally pulled forward to the present. Although she never mentions this anywhere else in the novel, the Narrator's inability to "definitively escape" Rayyan implies that their relationship exists in the past and present simultaneously.

This coexistence, even if it is temporary or shifting, disrupts standard notions of linear time that are so crucial to understandings of stable life narratives and subjecthood. Furthermore, temporal disruptions and confluences of past-present-future are component bodies within assemblages, where the physical and corporeal becomes de-centered and anything can be a body. As Jasbir Puar (2005) notes, "an assemblage is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency" (Puar, "Queer Times," 128). While assemblage is discussed more explicitly in Chapter 3, the link here between shifting temporality and assemblage is important, as it highlights the various destabilizing elements at work in the novel.

Along with the confusion of the start and end points of the Narrator and Rayyan's relationship, the Narrator remarks on the vagueness of their relationship status and the parameters that may be placed on them as a couple. Rayyan tells the Narrator that in the early part of their relationship, he had had sex with his ex-girlfriend. The Narrator recounts Rayyan's claims that "a little unfaithfulness and a lot of unfaithfulness are not the same thing; meanwhile, I was thinking, Once is enough for it to count as unfaithfulness. But in fact I didn't consider it that. Our very ambiguous relationship did not permit me to interpret what he had done as unfaithfulness" (al-Herz, 237-238). The Narrator cannot be upset about Rayyan's infidelity

because there is no solid indication of the limitations of their bond. They are together, but neither seems sure to what extent they are together.

This uncertainty is due largely to the fact that Rayyan lives in Riyadh, and the Narrator lives in Qatif. Indeed, if there is a demarcation to be found in their relationship, it is the physical lines of distance between them, which the Narrator views as the major determinant for why their relationship has no future. As she describes it, “We did not give the matter any thought. After all, we could not actually meet, and so we could not become embroiled in questions such as, Where will this relationship lead us? ... There was no *what about later on?* To plague us. It was a beginning that had no tomorrow” (al-Herz, 234). The distance that separates Rayyan and the Narrator simultaneously outlines that their relationship will come to an end, while also making it difficult to understand how or when, since they cannot meet face to face and only communicate via computer chats and cell phone conversations.

The result of their physical separation and vague relationship timeline means that the Narrator never truly closes herself off to Rayyan, even messaging him a year later to ask, “Still, Rayyan?” with a song that asks: “Are you still with me?” (al-Herz, 245). Thus, even after they no longer speak to each other, their relationship is marked by questions of where they stand with one another, not in the sense that the Narrator does not move on, but in the sense that she seems unsure about their starting point. This level of uncertainty ultimately results in an ambiguous temporality that circulates around their relationship both during and beyond their time together, again highlighting the ways that even when their relationship is in the past, it is also, to an extent, always in the present.

Though Rayyan’s relationship carries many of the more apparent signs of ambiguity, the Narrator’s relationship with Dareen holds similar markers. Unlike Rayyan’s relationship with the

Narrator, Dareen's relationship with her has a definite beginning and end point. With Dareen (a young woman she meets at a social party), there is never an explicit indication of the duration of their relationship, although it begins after the Narrator and Dai break up and ends when Dareen and her ex-lover Nadia get back together. The Narrator's initial confusion about their relationship, thus, does not stem from uncertainty about where it begins, but from uncertainty about what to call it. She explains to Dareen at the beginning of their relationship that, "I would not throw myself into this vortex of relationships where partners were shared, or relationships were open or involved multiple parties, or whatever the particular label or category was, into this world whose practices I had not yet even learned to pronounce with ease" (al-Herz, 177-178). On the one hand, her uneasiness with these "practices" could stem from her uneasiness with her own same-gender sexual relationships and how those relationships might be interpreted by others. The Narrator first meets Dareen at a pool party Dai is invited to and where there are many other female-female couples. Given that her first interactions with Dareen are among other female couples who seem open to "sharing partners," the Narrator is likely uncertain of the kind of relationship Dareen wants. On the other hand, this uneasiness could stem from her inability to clearly define what their involvement may look like. The ambiguity comes through from the Narrator's own difficulty with defining her and Dareen's partnership.

An additional complication to their relationship comes in the form of Nadia, Dareen's ex-lover and the woman for whom Dareen eventually leaves the Narrator. Interestingly, even as the Narrator points out that she is not interested in a relationship "where partners are shared," the Narrator is seemingly sharing Dareen with Nadia throughout their time together. Nadia's presence is not only a catalyst for the end of the Narrator and Dareen's relationship, but in fact Nadia's presence is interwoven into their relationship from its beginning. The Narrator

comments that “In most of Dareen’s conversations, Nadia was the topic of choice” (al-Herz, 194). So entrenched is Nadia in the workings of their relationship that the Narrator is the one who finally calls her so Dareen can set up a time for them to meet and reconcile. While the Narrator initially claims that she wants to be in an exclusive relationship with Dareen, she goes back on those claims in her dealings with Nadia.

Indeed, most of the Narrator’s relationships (Dai, Dareen, Rayyan) are open relationships in one way or another. As described previously, the Narrator knows that Rayyan has sex with another woman early in their relationship, she shares Dareen with Nadia, and she is aware that Dai has other partners besides her. “I had the tormenting feeling that I fell at the end of [Dai’s] queue of choice partners. She had a yield to equal the number of fingers on her hand, and so what could possibly make her content with only one!” (al-Herz, 94) the Narrator thinks, yet that knowledge is more a source of insecurity for the Narrator than a reason to break up with her. There is a repeated discrepancy here between what the Narrator says and what she actually does. While she states at various stages that she wants to be in exclusive relationships, her actions contradict those statements in each of her relationships. Questions of self-narration emerge from these contradictions: why might one say one thing but do another? For whom are these speaking and doing actions being taken? For the Narrator, the contradiction seems to stem from social pressures which move her toward monogamy and stability, even as her desires carry her toward more fluid kinds of relationships.

### 2.1.2 Space, Time, and Queerness

The Narrator’s relationship with her cousin Hiba also shows moments of temporal and relational ambiguity, most prominently in the nature of their relationship and the social space in

which it exists. When the Narrator first describes Hiba, she says that “I do not have a preexisting framework that allows me to define exactly what Hiba was in relation to me – or in relation to anyone but herself” (al-Herz, 26). She goes on to describe how “My relationship with Hiba was a cacophony of memories – long silly conversations, meeting at the Basta suq every Thursday, walking along the water, staying up late together when we had the next day off from school, and the walking stick of a grandfather from whose trunk our branches sprouted” (al-Herz, 27). Hiba’s place within the Narrator’s life is not an easily marked-out bond, but is rather a collection of disparate memories. Certainly, their relationship is made possible by Hiba’s familial ties and her female gender, but those things alone do not create the Narrator’s ties to Hiba, since there are other women in her family with whom she is not close.

Both Rayyan and Hiba’s relationships with the Narrator push back against heteronormative understandings of relationships and time. Judith (Jack) Halberstam (2005) analyzes ideas of non-heteronormative time and space in the book, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. Halberstam explains that heteronormative constructions of time are ruled by reproduction, and “time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples” (Halberstam, 5). By contrast, “‘Queer time’ is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam, 6). Similarly, the author’s discussion of ‘queer space’ “refers to the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (Halberstam, 6). Through these definitions, Halberstam

marks out queer time and queer space as areas that exist outside of heteronormative constructions of time and space.

Hiba and the Narrator's relationship may be marked as queer time up until Hiba announces her marriage to a man, Fadil. The narrator takes this news particularly hard, and laments at how "cheaply she could replace me with somebody else" (al-Herz, 66). The narrator's devastation at Hiba "replacing" her with her future husband seems to stem from the narrator's attachment to her place in Hiba's life and to Hiba herself. The Narrator describes her jealousy for Fadil, as well, saying "Fadil had inspired the burning taste of envy in my throat since our earliest childhood. Hiba had worshipped him when she was little and now here she was, leaving to marry him" (al-Herz, 62). Hiba's announcement of her engagement closes off the possibility of her remaining in queer time/space with the Narrator. Prior to Hiba's engagement, she and the Narrator could exist in heteronormative and queer time simultaneously, as heteronormative time always compels them forward while queer time may shift and cross that forward progress. However, after Hiba is engaged, the demarcating power of heterosexual marriage closes off the potential for Hiba to move in and out of queer time with the Narrator. As such, the shifting temporality available in the novel is restricted by this event. Where the Narrator's other relationships in the novel may maintain that shifting and ambiguous temporal quality (through which Hiba might have maintained a queer time/space attachment), the Narrator and Hiba cannot do so because of Hiba's physical entrance into heteronormative time.

The Narrator's relationship with Rayyan also exists within a type of queer time, as their relationship meets the standards of normative romance by virtue of it being a male-female coupling, but falls short of those normative standards in other aspects. For one thing, their relationship is exclusively virtual, so they never meet in person. Rather, they send pictures of



themselves to each other and have conversations online or through their cell phones. As the Narrator describes it, “My relationship with Rayyan, which flared and flamed suddenly beneath our fingers on our cell phone pads in a conversation lasting no more than ten minutes, clearly was going to sink and die out just as quickly” (al-Herz, 232). The geographic distance between them and their economic situations mean that they cannot meet in person, so all their interactions are mediated through some form of technology. The fact that they are never in the same place means that they never consummate their relationship with penetrative and reproductive intercourse, a fundamental tenet of heteronormative sexual practices within normative time.

Under the norms of heteronormative relationships, a proper heterosexual relationship should be monogamous, legitimized through marriage, and consummated by sex for reproductive purposes. However, the Narrator and Rayyan’s relationship carries none of these characteristics. The Narrator refers to their relationship several times as open and undefined, and Rayyan has sex with another woman during their relationship. Since the Narrator and Rayyan are not married, any sexual encounters between them would be frowned upon under heteronormative conditions; however, the fact that they have sex via online chatting and texting sets their relationship even further outside of societal norms, since sex should only be between a male human body and a female human body. Thus, their relationship is suspended outside of normative time and falls within the realm of queer time, which is by definition non-reproductive.

Their virtual relationship also highlights the influence of the internet on the formation of all of the Narrator’s relationships. When she first starts exploring her sexual desires and interests, she turns to the internet as a place to explore those desires, but also as a place to make friends. She describes, in a long but illuminating passage, the impact of the internet on herself and her relationships:

My friends, my little homelands, the man whom I thought I loved, my mailboxes, the cafes where we would meet – it was all virtual, even our names.... Dareen first introduced herself to me using her Internet name, and then apologized, smiling, and replaced it with the name on her birth certificate.... Rayyan chose the name that no one called him by except his mother.... Dai said, By pure coincidence my eye fell on the word Dai at the very moment I was registering, and there wasn't any other name in my head at the time" (al-Herz, 294).

Through the space of the internet, the Narrator, Dai, Dareen, Rayyan, and even Umar and Hiba, create an alternative space of self-creation and exploration. The space is simultaneously public and private, as it is on the public forum of the internet, but private through the local chatrooms and communication boards that they use. Through the internet, they are able to create different versions of themselves, even changing their names, and those new selves spill over from the virtual world into the real world, as Dareen and Dai both use their internet names in real life. The alternative space of the internet is also representative of a kind of queer public space, as it is one way through which the Narrator is able to meet people with whom she eventually enters into queer relationships. The disruption of heteronormative, linearly progressive timelines and clearly defined relationships, along with the opening up of queer space and time, produce narrative points that challenge and undermine standard ideas of stable time, place, and relations.

## 2.2 Narration, Fragmentation, and Selfhood

### 2.2.1 The Incoherent Self

These disruptions of stability are further explored in the novel through the Narrator's own narrative style, how she presents events in the novel, and ultimately how she is presenting herself. The Narrator shows a self-awareness of her narration, describing at several points in the novel how there are discrepancies and uncertainties between how events occurred in the past and how she is recounting them in the present. These disconnections within her self-narration (along with her ambiguous relationships and shifting temporality) highlight the novel's destabilization of the Narrator as a coherent and uniform subject.

The Narrator explicitly recognizes that she does not always recount events in their truest and most accurate form. In a passage that appears just prior to her telling Umar (a close male friend) about her relationship with Dai, the Narrator explains that there is a disconnect between how events have unfolded and how she recounts those events:

Perhaps it is that my ability to communicate has all but shifted into a particular and unintended sort of lying: that is, I am hopeless at squaring the reality of any object with the transmitted images of it.... It is not that I intend to say the opposite of what things say about themselves, nor to give them an aura any falsier than what is already there. But that is how it always ends up; I leave that gap as well as a trail of questions about the true nature of things around me.... And that is why often I arrive at each disclosure, each confession, with a single result: a hateful feeling that what I have drawn is an entirely new world, an ambiguous and dark world with no link whatsoever to the world that I intended originally to pass on through my mind and words. (al-Herz, 247)

The Narrator acknowledges the inability to retell a memory as it actually happened. Inevitably, at least for her, at the end of her retelling she finds that she has created a "new world" of that event that is not at all linked to the original. If the Narrator is unable to recall the originality of the event (something that is difficult for anyone), then ambiguities emerge both for the narration of

the past and the narration of the self. The past comes forth, but it is not the past as it was then; it is a new past, in some sense, recreated by the Narrator as she recounts. Similarly, if she is describing herself in the past, it is not the self that she truly was in the moment, but a recreation of herself. As such, claims of a coherent past or a stable self are made impossible through each retelling of the moment or event.

A similar moment of narrative ambiguity occurs during Dai and the Narrator's final sequence together, when the Narrator returns to Dai's house several months after they have broken up. Dai is in her bathroom, and the Narrator is waiting in her bedroom. The Narrator describes the scene as, "There, I waited five minutes, heavy and disconcerting minutes, hearing her voice in the bathroom and tracing the sound of her steps: she cleans her teeth, she washes her face, she moistens her fingers and pokes them into the locks of her hair, she dries her hands, she lifts her arm and smells herself, she examines her pajamas, she turns the key in the lock and comes out" (al-Herz, 277-278). As the Narrator temporarily takes on a kind of semi-omniscience, her presentation as a stable subject is interrupted. She cannot see all the actions Dai is taking, and yet she describes them as though she is, like an omniscient narrator would. Her subject-stability is further interrupted, though, by the temporal disruption that occurs in her description. The Narrator's knowledge of what Dai is doing in the bathroom likely comes from having watched her perform these tasks previously, when they were in a relationship. So the past and present merge in her description of Dai's movements, as well as the future, as the Narrator predicts each of Dai's invisible actions as they occur. As the past, present, and future converge through the narration of Dai's actions, the Narrator is situated squarely within this temporal convergence, traversing its moments. While a more normative reading of this passage might accept the Narrator's temporary movement into an omniscient voice as a normal part of novel-narration, I

would disagree. Instead, I contend that the Narrator's placement within the convergence of those temporalities supports the claim of her incoherent subject creation, given that a coherent subject is unlikely to be able to exist within three temporalities simultaneously. The significance of her subject incoherency, as it relates to Dai and others, is found in what it suggests about her sexuality. If the Narrator can be rendered incoherent or unstable, even temporarily, then it is difficult to imagine that she can maintain stable identities, including a sexual identity, supporting the novel's resistance to codifying her sexuality under a single identity label.

### 2.2.2 My Body, Not Myself:

The novel further supports the impossibility of maintaining a stable self through the Narrator's descriptions of her relationship to her body. Frequently she refers to her body as something separate from herself, a body whose actions and intentions feel disconnected and outside of her control. She first recalls this disconnection from her body when describing her first sexual experience with Dai: "From that moment, Dai was my body's commanding mistress and I became simply an organism whose body lies elsewhere, and lurks in obscure isolation, a remote, secluded place that allowed me to witness – but only as an outside observer, one who does not react" (al-Herz, 12). This initial disconnection of the Narrator from her body, and her body's ability to be influenced and controlled (so she believes) by others is a theme that runs throughout the novel and manifests in several different forms.

One of the forms that her detachment takes is her descriptions of herself and her body as physically separated entities that seemingly co-exist in the same space, but are not the same. Again, in relation to Dai, the Narrator says that "Dai sliced me into two parts: my body, glorying in its confections, and my self, so determined on purification from its offenses" (al-Herz, 17).

Similarly, much later in the novel, the Narrator states, “I was crying, too, or rather, I was leaving it to my body to cry, to clear a space for its grieving: my body and I, we sit together on the steps and we cry” (al-Herz, 285). In both passages, the Narrator describes her body as a distinct entity, something that may sit beside her, a companion in the moment, but not in unity with her. Yet, this separation is not an indication that she has transcended beyond her body, but rather that her body and its actions are sometimes difficult to control. This disconnection of the Narrator and her body continues the theme of the novel that the Narrator does not exist within the parameters of unified mind-body-subject creation and suggests the impossibility of a coherent self.

This theme is also propelled through the novel by the Narrator’s struggles with epilepsy. There are suggestions that she has been dealing with her epileptic seizures since childhood, but the Narrator’s first explicit description of having a seizure occurs during one of her days at the university. She leaves the classroom and stays in the bathroom as the seizure overtakes her. During that time, she describes, “My feelings were so confused and heavy and chaotic that they left my legs too weak and tired to hold me up. My heart was beating erratically and I felt all mixed up inside, and there was a colossal, tyrannical ringing in my head...” (al-Herz, 106). The overwhelming nature of the seizure leaves her mentally stunned and physically weak, unable to control her body for a time. The Narrator attempts to mentally prepare herself for the seizures ahead of time, explaining that she created scenarios to practice how she would react when she had a seizure. However, these mental “drills” do not help her in the end, as she explains, “When a seizure actually arrived, though, it would be overpowering, pulverizing, and I would be unable to remember a single element of my scheme” (al-Herz, 108). As a seizure “overpowers” her, the mind and body temporarily disengage from each other, leaving her powerless to use or control either.

Such a loss of control, and the fears and shame surrounding that loss, lead the Narrator to claim that she is being betrayed by her body. Toward the end of the novel, when her seizures are becoming more frequent, her frustration and confusion at her body comes through. “My body betrays me,” she says. “It hurts – the unfaithfulness of a body that has always been neutral, even in the worst of its histories with me” (al-Herz, 253). The betrayal she feels stems on the one hand from her frustrations of having epilepsy itself, an illness that makes her feel weak and inferior, in part because of social stigmas. Yet on the other hand, her betrayal also comes from her own notion that her body could and would remain “neutral,” submitting and following her as a part of the total subject-self. Her betrayal is felt through the recognition of the neutrality of her body as a false possibility, a recognition that her body might always already be capable of moving and reacting in independent and unpredictable ways, either positive or negative. The seizures become, to a degree, a physical manifestation of the impossibility of the Narrator sustaining control over her body in a stable and continuous manner. The seizures highlight, if in a dramatic and intense fashion, the potential at any moment of the Narrator and her body disconnecting, her body following one motion as her “self” may follow another.

### 2.2.3 Mirrors of Me:

The Narrator representing herself in fragmented ways is also visible in her frequent descriptions of mirrors and what they reflect. Twice in the novel, the Narrator mentions that another character is a mirror image of her. The first instance is with Hassan, her older brother who has passed away prior to her telling this story. She says, “Hassan remains my eye: Hassan is the eye that sees me, and he is all my mirrors. He is the eye whose light was put out, setting me into a blind nighttime in which no one could see me or sense that I existed” (al-Herz, 40). Dareen

is also compared to the Narrator as a mirror image, explaining that “Dareen was like me in a way that made me appear a less mature image of her. She was similar to the point of being exactly alike in some aspects, to the point of being my mirror image” (al-Herz, 218). That the Narrator finds her reflection in other people suggests the kind of fragmentation described above. She is not a whole self and subject, but is instead fragmented and separated; this separation opens up the potential for her to see her reflection in other people.

Physical mirrors also play a role, although it is a complicated role where mirrors offer the Narrator liberations and limitations. Initially, when the Narrator describes her first encounter with a mirror, she sees its presence and effects as a kind of liberation. She first describes seeing her reflection in several mirrors during her first sexual encounter with Dai. Before they have sex, the Narrator pulls Dai over to a wardrobe, which opens up to reveal several mirrors, and she sees herself reflected back, describing:

I hung onto the mirror, my flagrant nakedness sending me into a state of rapture I had never experienced before, a feeling of bliss at seeing myself desired like this, and escaping the laws mandated by my own body.

I was liberating me from myself. Turning my face toward the mirrors that Dai exposed as she opened the doors to her wardrobe, I was thrown off balance, distracted by these sudden and multiple images of myself. It was not just a matter of being released, of feeling free, but rather, it was a sense of no longer being able to exert a guiding hand over myself. My authority over whatever part of myself I owned was worthless. (al-Herz, 12)

Her initial moment of seeing her naked body reflected back multiple times seems to overwhelm her with a sense of excitement, which in turn allows her to feel liberated and free in a new way. However, that initial freedom gives way to the Narrator feeling a loss of control over herself, such that her liberation from her fear about her body also means that she can no longer control what her body wants. Additionally, the multiple images of herself in the mirrors, multiple selves shown in that moment, continues the theme of the impossibility of the Narrator representing



herself as a stable subject. As in other places in the novel, this instability of the self brings her a sense of liberation, as well as a sense of unpredictability and lack of control.

The Narrator's sense of losing control over her body after her early encounter with Dai's mirror slowly morphs throughout the novel into her describing mirrors as places that have trapped and changed her reflection. After one of her meetings with Dareen, the Narrator considers something her mother says: "Life is nothing but a reflection of you" (al-Herz, 195). She then questions this logic with, "but why is my reflection as contradictory as this? A wounding reflection that sends my face back deformed when I look in my mirrors" (al-Herz, 195). The Narrator's reflection is a "contradiction," which suggests that she is expecting to see a different reflection than the one she gets. The disconnection between self and mirror occurs, perhaps, because the Narrator expects to see a particular version of herself when she looks in the mirror, but is instead met by a version that is so different as to be contradictory, and subsequently deems it "wounded" and "deformed" because it is not what she wants to see.

This distorted reflection is echoed in an earlier scene with Dai, where the Narrator explains that Dai "stared as though my reflection were someone other than me, as though that reflection did not belong to me or resemble me; indeed, as though someone she had never seen before was staring back at her" (al-Herz, 135). After this moment, Dai asks the Narrator if there is something different about her, and the Narrator admits that she has cut her hair (al-Herz, 135). Again, as the passage above describes, the notion of seeing an unfamiliar reflection in the mirror stems from an initial expectation of what the mirror will reflect that does not materialize in the mirror. Dai expects to see the Narrator as she has looked in the past, but when the reflection does not match that previous image, it is as though "someone she has never seen" is in the reflection. Both examples present a problem with self-representation in a way, as there is always the

potential to fail at that presentation. The Narrator attempts to present and narrate herself in a particular way, creating expectations of her self-image around that presentation. However, when she or others see her reflected back (in these examples by the mirrors), the mismatch of subject, representation, and reflection is exposed as unstable, and the possibility for the unity of self, self-creation, and self-reflection collapse.

A final theme represented by the mirrors is that they are traps, and that the Narrator's past self has been trapped behind a mirror ever since she first had sex with Dai. In her final encounter with Dai, the Narrator asks Dai to open the doors of her wardrobe once more, and she considers the scene:

For [the mirrors] I had memorized a single story, the story of the beginning. She got up and opened them, and so suddenly I found my body all over her room, the whole length of that wardrobe and four of its six doors and three fourths of the wall supporting it. I glanced at the mirrors. There I was, many times over. If I were to pick up a rock and throw it at the mirror and my body shattered, would the pieces even have any substance? ... Then a thought occurred to me. Perhaps that old soul of mine which had been imprisoned in the mirror ever since Dai had first touched me would come out! (al-Herz, 282)

These mirrors reflect back many versions of the Narrator, including the version from the past, which she claims has been trapped here. The Narrator's claim that some part of herself has been trapped in the mirror follows problematic lines of suggestion that her first sexual experience was difficult to the point of her leaving the self that experienced it behind. Yet, the trapped imagery also does the job of supporting the novel's presentation of the Narrator as fragmented and incoherent. If part of the Narrator's self can be left behind, then she can be splintered and separated off, a notion that challenges common understandings of the self as inseparable and unified. If her "self" is not unified, then it is not fully under her command, and her desires and body, which are not wholly hers, may take her to unexpected and undetermined places. Such undetermined trajectories are fundamental to sexuality-assemblage formations, and the

ambiguity and instability of the Narrator and her relationships opens up greater possibilities and potentials within those assemblages.

### 3 CIRCULATING SEXUALITY: DESIRE, IDENTITY, AND FLUIDITY

What is productive about the Narrator not always presenting herself in a stable and cohesive manner? Why does it matter that her body and her desires are not always wholly under her control? What might this mean for the Narrator's understanding of her sexual desires and sexuality? To investigate these questions, I will now consider the function of assemblage, and more specifically sexuality-assemblage, in *The Others*. As the Narrator navigates her sexuality and her same-gender sexual desires, she is confronted with questions about identity and where exactly her desires lie on the sexuality "spectrum." As she works through these questions, she is repeatedly pushed toward social narratives that assume that who she has sex with must mean something about who she is, something about her identity. Yet the Narrator is resistant to this narrative throughout. In early explorations of her sexuality, the Narrator searches various terms on Google, but the results are unsuccessful for her. As I noted in Chapter 1, the Narrator explains, "I read all the pages the Google search engine would give me when I typed in the English words *homosexual* and *bisexual*. The pages that came up made my head hurt. It felt as though they were forcing upon me awareness, an acknowledgement, of an orientation that was not really mine" (al-Herz, 22-23). Her resistance to these words isn't merely a resistance to Western ideas of sexual categories, but is, I will argue, a resistance to a named sexuality at all. Furthermore, I contend that sexuality-assemblage has the potential to bring the Narrator beyond the necessity of a stable sexuality. While she does not always follow the line of flight to new potentials that the sexuality-

assemblage opens up, the Narrator and the novel never-the-less present them as varied potentials and possibilities.

In the following chapter, I consider how the Narrator expresses her reticence to identify and name a specific sexual identity for herself in order to highlight the ways that such an identity is unproductive for her. I then move in to the productive uses of assemblage theory by first analyzing some assemblage moments within the novel. Additionally, I explore how desire and shame function in the novel, specifically in relation to the Narrator and Dai. Through this exploration, I am able to examine how sexuality-assemblages can be both deterritorialized along lines of potential and possibility, while also being reterritorialized under social scripts and normative standards. Finally, I analyze how the Narrator navigates her relationships with Umar and Dai, as they are enfolded in various molar and molecular sexuality-assemblages, again leading the Narrator to experience both reterritorializing and deterritorializing moments.

### **3.1 But That Isn't Me**

#### **3.1.1 Resisting Identity**

In thinking about the Narrator's sexuality, I begin with the question of sexual identity itself and how that is represented in the novel. Throughout the novel, the Narrator is hesitant to name or attach any specific sexual identity to herself. She admits to others that she has had what she calls "homo sex," but repeatedly resists the determination that these acts then identify her as a lesbian. Similarly, Dai (one of the two women that the Narrator has sex with) does not declare or name herself as a lesbian, even though Dai's sexual partners always seem to be women.

The one character in the novel who comes closest to a "traditional" understanding of a named, homosexual identity is Dareen, specifically when she is recounting her relationship with

Nadia. Dareen explains to the Narrator how she and Nadia lived together during college, spending all their time together both at home and at the university (al-Herz, 185), in a similar fashion to any couple in a traditional or normative relationship. When Dareen becomes engaged to a man, Ali, and eventually marries him a short time, she later admits that she still only loves Nadia. The Narrator asks, “Did you love him [Ali]?” and Dareen replies, “No. He was a good man. He had a big heart, but my heart was entirely with Nadia. Or, to be truthful about it, yes, I did love him as a person, it wasn’t easy not to love him at all, but – as a man? No” (al-Herz, 185). Dareen explains several times as she discusses her relationship with Ali that she tried to love him, but with no success, saying that “I was not created for a man” (al-Herz, 188). Ultimately, Dareen and Ali get a divorce. Her constant assertions that she is not interested in Ali “as a man” suggests that she is exclusively attracted to women, and most potentially aligned with a declared, lesbian self-identity.

This argument is further supported by Dareen’s description of her first kiss with Nadia. Dareen describes their kiss, and the Narrator asks if she was disgusted by it. Dareen responds, “No, to the contrary, I felt fantastic, elated. My heart was beating massively, and I felt... maybe I felt like suddenly I knew I had become a woman.... I felt as though I had already somehow prepared myself for that kiss, as if I was ready for it, as if it had simply been hidden in some secret place, as if...as if I had lived this before, like, in a previous life...” (al-Herz, 183). Such statements that it is a woman’s kiss that brings Dareen into her adult woman-ness and that she feels like these feelings have always been a part of her enforce the portrayal of Dareen as a woman who might self-identify as a lesbian, or perhaps as a person whose sexuality says something essential about herself.

Dareen's portrayal as such contrasts quite distinctly from the Narrator's, who throughout the novel resists associating herself with any named sexual identity. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, when first thinking about her relationship with Dareen, the Narrator argues that "I would not throw myself into this vortex of relationships where partners were shared, or relationships were open or involved multiple parties, or whatever the particular label or category was, into this world whose practices I had not yet even learned to pronounce with ease" (al-Herz, 177-178). She is uncertain of the labels surrounding this potential relationship with Dareen, and I would argue that this uncertainty is due to her resistance to sexual labels in general. It could be argued that her difficulty with "pronouncing these practices with ease" is the result of her general uneasiness with her desires for Dareen. But the novel and the Narrator herself seem to draw on different possibilities; that in fact, her uneasiness stems from the Narrator's inability to reconcile sexuality categories with her own sexual practices and experiences.

Several times in the novel the Narrator recognizes her sexual practices and her desire for relationships with women, yet she does not take these practices to mean that she is a lesbian. When she tells Umar about her relationship with Dai, they have the following exchange where Umar asks the Narrator:

Do you love Dai? [Umar]  
 I am not a lesbian. So don't ask me that in such a tone of voice! [Narrator]  
 Do you hate her?  
 No, never!  
 And Dai – does she love you?  
 I don't think so.  
 Why do you insist on denying the act of love? (al-Herz, 249)

In this moment between the Narrator and Umar, she pushes back against the labeling of herself as a lesbian, yet even so does not deny that she was with Dai or that she cared for her. What

upsets her is not that Umar knows she was with Dai, but the assertion that because she was with her, then she is a lesbian.

The Narrator's feelings are better articulated earlier in the novel during a conversation she has with Dareen. The Narrator says to Dareen, "I've had homo sex. But I'm not a homo. The constitution of my desire is not...I would look her way and find her smiling indulgently, but I would go on. I don't mean that it is wrong, I would say. If I were really like that, then it would be my business and I would be responsible for handling it, period" (al-Herz, 193-194). Here, the Narrator again recognizes her desire for women and same-gender sexual experiences, but denies that these experiences mean she is homosexual. Her comment on Dareen's "indulgent smile" suggests that the Narrator perceives her smile as Dareen quietly acknowledging that the Narrator is judgmental of Dareen's lesbian desires. The Narrator's follow-up statement that she doesn't think it is wrong supports this possibility. Additionally, her comment of "if I were really like that" is the Narrator's recognition of a homosexual identity but also a recognition of its limitations. A homosexual identity, in the Narrator's statement, is something to be "handled," which suggests her perception of it as burdensome and limiting. A normative reading of these two exchanges might argue that she is in denial about her homosexuality, but the fact that she is open about her desires disrupts this argument. Instead, her assertions about her sexual desires indicates that she does not see naming herself as a lesbian to be integral to her experiences. Even as the Narrator grapples with her sexual desires and where those desires take her, she is resistant to naming a sexual identity because of its narrowing properties which signify her sexual acts as indicative of something she is, not something she does.

### 3.2 Assemblage: Inside and Outside the Grid:

#### 3.2.1 Moments:

The Narrator's discomfort with sexual identity categories suggests that she views her sexuality through an alternative lens; here I explore sexuality-assemblage as an interpretive paradigm that can offer an alternative to identitarian frameworks. To understand the ways in which sexuality-assemblages function in the novel, and how sexuality-assemblages may open possibilities for sexual experiences undetermined by identitarian parameters, it is important to first examine assemblages more broadly. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980) were among the first to discuss the idea of assemblage, and Paul Patton (1994) in his article "Metamorpho-Logic: Bodies and Powers in *A Thousand Plateaus*" offers a helpful breakdown of Deleuze and Guattari's arguments. During an analysis and explanation of Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of assemblages in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Patton describes an assemblage as "a multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, whose unity comes solely from the fact that these items function together, that they 'work' together as a functional entity" (Patton, 158). Assemblages have a specific relationship to bodily territorializations, where "on the one hand, there is the constitution of a territory, a movement of reterritorialisation. On the other hand, there is always a movement of deterritorialisation, a line of flight along which the assemblage breaks down or becomes transformed into something else" (Patton, 158). Which is to say, an assemblage is a temporary coming together of disparate objects and bodies that work together in a given event and which are constantly then being broken apart and de- or reterritorialized into new assemblages.



One of the most beneficial components of assemblage is its open-ended and rhizomatic potential. Patton explains that rhizomes are “flat, open-ended multiplicities defined only by thresholds beyond which an increase of dimensions will involve a change in the nature of the system as a whole” (Patton, 157). In her feminist examination of Deleuze and Guattari, Elizabeth Grosz (1993) similarly describes the rhizome as “an underground – but perfectly manifest – network of multiple branching roots and shoots, with no central axis, no unified point of origin and no given direction of growth” (Grosz, 173). The rhizomatic nature of the assemblage is crucial to its usefulness, since the flat, open-ended structuring means there are no hierarchical levels, fixed lines of progression, or central starting points. All bodies within the assemblage exist in a flat relation to each other, moving together and apart in unencumbered directions. The significance of any assemblage as it comes together, then, is not found in what it *means* that these parts have assembled for the event, but rather what the parts *do* during that event.

Here, I want to consider two moments in the novel that express, in various ways, how an assemblage may manifest. One such example is a scene with Dai and the Narrator on their bus ride home from the university. Dai and the Narrator are in the middle of a fight, and the Narrator describes:

An eye to the window and an eye on Dai, and I was split between two opposing longings: one, that the bus would swallow us up into a trip that would never end, where we would have no chance of arriving, even late; or, that the bus would fling me out exactly at my front door. I craved the possibility of our bodies touching, of her fingertip engraving something onto the palm of my hand, either by pure coincidence or intentionally. (al-Herz, 90)

In this moment, the Narrator is enfolded into an assemblage of disparate parts that create an affective moment of potential. The Narrator, Dai, the bus, infinite time, the Narrator’s emotions of confusion and longing, fingers, and hands all come together temporarily in an assemblage with multiple possible outcomes: the Narrator might stay on the bus, might touch Dai’s hand,

might scream at her, and so on. The encounter might be reterritorialized to fit social and sexual norms, constituting her under habits of sexual identity. Or it might deterritorialize toward any of the multiplicituous potentials in the moment. The meaning within the assemblage and eventual outcome of the assembled moment are secondary to how the various bodies manifest and work together during the assemblage.

A similar example is when Dai and the Narrator attend a party with other women, some of whom are in female same-gendered relationships. The party is held at a woman's home, and some of the events take place around the home's pool. As dinner finishes and the women begin to swim in the pool, the Narrator says of the scene that "the air was electric: laughter and splashing, little tricks and transient touches. And I was fully charged, the tension flooding through me, too strong to dam up. Even the water could not drink it out of me. I had never before attended a gathering like this and so I had no idea what might happen. My expectations were flung as wide open as could be..." (al-Herz, 142). The encounter assembles with the pool, the Narrator, the other women, the sounds of laughter and splashing, and the energy of the atmosphere. All of the bodies become full participants in the assemblage: the air holds an energy, the water in the pool can "not drink" the charge from her, and the circulating energy feels physical and tangible. Again, the resulting outcomes within the assemblage are less significant than how these bodies work together in the encounter itself. Indeed, the Narrator remarks at the end on how "wide open" the possibilities and outcomes of the moment are.

The Narrator's relationship with Rayyan is also especially helpful in considering assemblages in the novel. Given that their relationship is a long-distance one, the ways in which they meet up, communicate, and even have sex are all mediated through various kinds of mediums. Rayyan frequently remarks on how their knowledge of what the other looks, smells,

feels, or sounds like is all filtered through mechanisms of space, time, and technology. As Rayyan describes, “I have actually smelled that perfume you wear, *Le premier jour*, but I don’t know what its fragrance becomes when it is on your skin.... You have my pictures but you would not know my features without a square of glossy paper and a camera flash. You have my voice but you wouldn’t know what I sound like when my voice is not traveling through a medium” (al-Herz, 242). Thus, the dynamics of their relationship and all the connections that they share are always formed through technology and machines. As a result, their encounters manifest through assemblages that include bodies that are more than just humans.

When dealing with assemblage, bodies are more than just individual humans. Patton states Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of bodies as

an abstract conception of bodies of all kinds, one which does not discriminate between animate and inanimate bodies, individual or collective bodies, biological or social bodies: “A body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity”. What makes a given arrangement of parts into a body is precisely their co-operation. (Patton, 158)

Thinking about a body in a Deleuze-Guattarian way, a body becomes de-centered from merely a human subject to being an open-ended “arrangement of parts” that become a body by their relational capacities and interactions with other bodies (Patton, 158). By de-centering the body as only human such that any set of relational parts can be a body, then the human-as-exclusive-body is also de-centered within the assemblage, making the assemblage open to any and all various forms of bodies as well. Jasbir Puar (2011) similarly explains that “Assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human/animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies – bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on” (Puar, “I would rather,” para. 14). From this analytical angle where anything can be a body, Rayyan and the Narrator’s sexual encounters become an assemblage of

their human bodies, their phones or computers, the typing keys, their fingers, and so on. Beyond that, their sexual encounters may form in sexuality-assemblage moments that also include things like the spatial distance of their separation, where they are in their different locations during sex, what they are sitting or laying on, and so on. Indeed, any item, space, and sensation can be folded into their sex under the assemblage concept.

### 3.2.2 Desire and Shame:

As the Narrator is enfolded into sexuality-assemblage moments in the novel, part of those assemblages include affective feelings of desire. The Narrator describes early on and throughout the novel how her body's desire for women is powerful and potentially uncontrollable, or so she perceives it to be. Her descriptions of her desire are sometimes intensely physical: "All at once I had seen my body's power to turn animal-like. I had realized how very faithful it could be to its basest instincts. How completely shameless it was" (al-Herz, 14-15). She is surprised by the intensity of her sexuality and her desire but makes no mention of any disgust at the object of her desire, that she is interested in a woman -- Dai. The Narrator has a similar reaction when she thinks about Hiba, her cousin, saying "I needed Hiba's body to be close by, and I needed to find that nothing had changed about what I felt toward it, or my ability to look at it without framing it in sensuous physicality. I needed to find that I could brush against it without the blaze of my lust flaring up" (al-Herz, 26). In both scenes, the Narrator describes her desiring feelings for a woman, but it is not the woman she is concerned with, so much as her feelings of desire themselves. The Narrator's focus is not settled on the female bodies specifically, but rather on the power and unpredictability of her desire and where those desires might potentially lead.

That the Narrator is more concerned with her desire and the potential of that desire, rather than the objects of desire themselves, is consistent with Deleuze and Guattari's considerations of desire as integral and productive within assemblages. Many philosophers, such as Lacan and Hegel, have associated desire with lack, but Deleuze and Guattari view desire as an active part of a being that is integral to the formation of assemblages (Patton, 160). For Deleuze and Guattari, quoted in Paul Patton's article, "“desire is always assembled: it is what the assemblage determines it to be”" (Patton, 161). As such, desire becomes a productive part of the assemblage working not because of the lack or absence of something, but because of the potential and presence of things. Furthermore, desire is as open-ended and rhizomatic as any part of an assemblage has the potential to be.

Elizabeth Grosz elaborates on this idea, stating "as production, desire does not provide blueprints, models, ideals or goals. Rather, it experiments, it makes, it is fundamentally aleatory" (Grosz, 712). Desire then is not the agent that determines what the assemblage will become; rather, the territorialization of the assemblage can make and unmake the desire as it is re- and deterritorialized. Considering desire in this way, it becomes an emergent component of the assemblage, rather than a driving force that points an assemblage in a given direction. Thus, the Narrator's sexual desires may be considered a productive energy moving her toward her sexual experiences with Dai, Dareen, Rayyan, and Umar, but not directing those desires in a predetermined way. Thus, the Narrator's sexual desires always open up the possibility for new sexual encounters, assemblages, and sexuality-assemblages. However, as with any body in an assemblage, her desires have the potential to be reterritorialized under normative sexual identity practices and parameters, and to be deterritorialized along unknown potentials.

If the possibility exists for thinking of desire as a productive energy in sexuality-assemblage encounters, how is it that the Narrator feels such shame toward her body, her body's desires, and her sexual experiences? To think through this, one must first consider the nature of shame as an affective potential. In her chapter "Shame Before Others," Sara Ahmed (2004) considers the ways that shame is socially produced and individually internalized. Ahmed explains that "shame becomes felt as a matter of being – of the relation of self to itself – insofar as shame is about appearance, about how the subject appears before and to others" (Ahmed, 104-105). In conjunction with this attribute of shame, Ahmed contends that "in shame, more than my action is at stake: *the badness of an action is transferred to me*, such that I feel myself to be bad and to have been 'found' or 'found out' as bad by others" (Ahmed, 105). Shame is, subsequently, characterized by a two-fold concern: one, that there is something inherent within oneself that is bad or wrong, and two, that this bad or wrong quality has been seen by others and labeled as wrong. The importance of the self being observed by others as wrong has the effect of linking shame to various social norms. Ahmed argues that "the story of moral development is bound up with the reproduction of social norms, in particular, with norms of sexual conduct. Shame can work as a deterrent: in order to avoid shame, subjects must enter the 'contract' of the social bond, by seeking to approximate a social ideal" (Ahmed, 106-107). The final result of shame, then, is to create a set of normative social codes that one is morally bound to follow, and deviation from those codes results in feelings of shame.

The novel presents shame in ways that are consistent with Ahmed's analysis through the characterization of the Narrator and Dai. Dai is arguably a more obvious example, as she frames herself, at least within the Narrator's narration of her, as a sexual deviant. There is only one chapter in the novel that is not told from the Narrator's point of view, and this chapter is devoted

exclusively to Dai. In this chapter, Dai recounts her first sexual experiences. Dai first describes Balqis, a young university student of around 21 or 22 years old, who begins tutoring Dai when she is twelve years old. After Dai receives her first high marks on a test, Balqis rewards her with a kiss, and bit by bit they begin a sexual relationship. Their relationship carries several markers that are considered deviant by normative standards: their age difference and that Dai is very young, plus the fact that it is a female same-gendered sexual relationship. But more significantly, Dai explains that their sexual encounters were extremely aggressive. As she describes, *“At a moment when my desire was at its most vulnerable, she asked me to slap her. I would not do it. She raised an angry palm and slapped me.... and when she got to the fifth slap and my ears were ringing and I could hardly hear at all, I raised my palm and slapped her with all the strength that this pain had thrust into me. A fierce pleasure suddenly overtook me”* (al-Herz, 157). Dai continues from here to explain how her sex with Balqis always included aggressive acts such as slapping and biting, and that the pleasure Dai feels from these acts continues in the present, with her sexual relationships with other women including the Narrator.

This mixture of Dai’s desire for aggressive sex and that she desires sex with women becomes the source of her shame. She even goes so far as to call herself a monster, saying *“Balqis trained me and tamed me – or should I say the opposite?... I had been a girl and I became a savage cat. I had been a girl and I became a monster, misshapen and deformed. Isn’t that what I should say?”* (al-Herz, 157). Dai’s shame at “becoming a monster” becomes internalized such that she believes it be something that is she now, something that she cannot undo, and more importantly something that she may do to others. Dai mentions several times in her chapter that she is afraid of “hurting” or “soiling” the Narrator the way she was by Balqis (al-Herz, 160-161). Dai’s shame comes then from feeling as though some part of herself is deviant,

that this deviance can pollute others, and that this deviance falls outside of prescribed social norms of acceptable relationships and behavior. And yet, she also recognizes in a small way that she is expected to see herself as “a monster” and feel that shame. Her asking “isn’t that what I should say?” indicates Dai’s understanding of the normative social scripts that she is deviating from, and as a result should see herself as a “monster.” Her subtle recognition of these social scripts allows her, at least in this moment, to acknowledge the pressure and power they hold, even as she is reterritorialized within their boundaries.

The Narrator’s internalization of shame because of her sexual experiences is not as heavily handed as Dai’s portrayal, but carries similar characteristics. The Narrator feels for a time that there is something wrong with her after her first sexual experience with Dai. “I could seek forgiveness for my sin,” she says, “or I could live under the protective umbrella of denial, not simply denial of what I had done, but also of the painful notion that lay hidden behind it, which told me that I was something other than what people naturally are” (al-Herz, 17). In this moment, the reader sees the Narrator express that she wishes to deny her actions in order to avoid shame, while simultaneously already feeling shame about her being different from “what people naturally are.” This claim of what people “naturally are” also brings back suggestions of stable identity categories. Here, she is still contending with this necessity to see her sexuality as something that she “is,” even as she works to resist these assumptions and constructs.

Soon after this moment, the Narrator seeks out Hiba (her cousin) as a way to test her feelings, thinking to herself “I needed to be near to Hiba. I needed to touch her and I needed her to disclose to me that there was a place in myself that had not yet become soiled. That the cravings which had passed through my body were not a flaw in my physical chemistry that would lead me to commit the offense a second time...” (al-Herz, 26). The Narrator wants to be



close to Hiba to assure herself that she has not changed, and yet she is also afraid that her body will give her away, and Hiba will see her desires which society has deemed shameful. Social pressure and fear of being exposed to others, thus, turns the Narrator's sexual desires from productive feelings into restrictive shame.

The novel also presents the Narrator's shame through her narrations of dealing with epilepsy. Several times in the novel, the Narrator has an epileptic seizure, and one of these seizures happens while she is at the university. She is particularly devastated by this incident, since she had told none of her fellow students that she has epilepsy, and remarks to herself how she has kept her "illness" a secret, thinking:

I kept my secret so well, even from my closest friends, from girls who were so often in my company, and then one single spell scattered all of my long efforts like particles of dust or soot.

My illness had always been a secret.... It was as if the illness was a sin without possibility of forgiveness, a flaw it was necessary to hide, a little scandal blemishing the family that must not get out beyond the most intimate circles. (al-Herz, 110)

Her feelings of shame about her epilepsy hearken back to Ahmed's discussion of shame noted above, where her shame stems from the feeling that there is something inherently wrong or unnatural about her, specifically that she is not healthy. Yet, that shame also stems from the reality that now other people recognize and label that unhealthiness of her body and will now treat her differently. The Narrator keeps her epilepsy a secret for fear that others will see her as sick and weak, and when she has her seizure at school, she sees her efforts at secrecy fall apart. She is, in an intriguing narrative parallel, "outed." Hopefully, the parallel of this moment is not lost, too, as indeed the Narrator feels similar kinds of shame surrounding both her desires and her seizures. The shame of both manifests directly as a result of the societal codes of conduct that compel her to adhere to normalizing bodily formations and functions.

Her shameful feelings appear most frequently though, in relation to her experiences with Dai. Her shame becomes so intense at moments that she cannot enjoy her sexual experiences with Dai. In one of her final intimate moments with Dai, the Narrator thinks,

How much I had always hated the moment when she reached my lower body, making it necessary to go further, to bare more expanses; and where my cooperation appeared to be something agreed on in advance, waiting only for her to ask, or even for just a little hint. How much I had despised discovering, once we had reached this point, that I had become naked, as if being completely naked was not inevitable, given what was taking place. (al-Herz, 281)

In this passage, the Narrator's shame stems on the one hand from being naked in front of Dai. Several times in the novel, the Narrator says that she does not like to be naked, even taking showers with her clothes on for a time. However, beyond her shame of being naked in front of Dai, is the suggestion in the passage that her nakedness is "something agreed on in advance," an inevitability. The Narrator knows that her relationship with Dai is contentious, and at this point in the novel the Narrator has left Dai after she had attacked the Narrator in a jealous fit. Yet despite these facts, she returns to Dai one last time, and her lack of control around Dai in this moment is a source of the Narrator's shame. Her desire for Dai brings the Narrator back, just as her desire allows the possibility for her to be naked in front of Dai. The Narrator's desire is transferred into shame because she is unable to properly control those desires, unable to protect herself from someone who had physically hurt her, and unable to ignore the pull to return.

### 3.2.3 Habit and Potential

Sexuality-assemblage has the ability to both maintain the Narrator's feelings of shame and move beyond the shame script. The potentiality of sexuality-assemblage comes from what Deleuze and Guattari name as the vertical axis of the assemblage: molecular and molar assemblages. Molecular assemblages are characterized as "fluid lines which map processes of

becoming, change, movement, reorganization” (Grosz, 176). Molecular assemblages are fully open to all possible potentials, where the deterritorializing of bodies (any kinds of bodies) is never prescribed but is always in a state of becoming. Molar assemblages, by contrast, are distinguished by “the line that divides, orders, hierarchizes and regulates social relations through binary codes” (Grosz, 176). Molar assemblages function on the level of how individuals are organized and signified in the world, creating identities, understanding social relations, constructing cultural norms, and so on. Although molecular and molar assemblages seem antithetical, Deleuze and Guattari argue that they are both along the same vertical axis, as “becomings are always molecular, traversing and realigning molar ‘unities’” (Grosz, 176).

Sexuality-assemblages similarly come together through molecular and molar formations. Nick Fox and Pam Alldred, in their discussion of sexuality-assemblages, explain that sexuality through a molecular assemblage “refers to the deterritorializing, nomadic and rhizomic flow of affect between and around bodies and other relations, a *socially productive* flow” (Fox, 776). When sexuality is removed from an identitarian framing (where sexuality is a part of a stable self), a sexuality-assemblage manifested along molecular flows holds no preconceived notions of how sexuality, a sexual body, or a sexual encounter may move and engage. A molecular sexuality-assemblage is, then, an open flow of intensities and energies around and across sexual bodies.

The manifestation of molar sexuality-assemblages are described as assemblages where, “the rhizomic flow of affect is continuously subject to restrictions and blockages, often produced by molar, aggregating affects that codify, categorize and organize. Thus, territorialized, sexuality loses its nomadic character, channeling desire into a relatively narrow range of sexual capacities” (Fox, 776). Instead of the sexuality-assemblage being open to all possibilities, the assemblage

begins to be territorialized in a very particular way. An assemblage still exists, as various parts and bodies, such as memories, sensations, physical interactions, social norms, and so on are coming together. However, in a molar assemblage, or a molar sexuality-assemblage, the reterritorialization occurs in ways that involve signification of the assemblage and its attendant parts. Sexuality is largely experienced through these more structured forms of molar sexuality-assemblages, which in turn inform and create ideas about sexual identity categories.

To think about molecular and molar sexuality-assemblages in the novel, I want to look at a passage that shows the shifting within a sexuality-assemblage between molecular and molar. Midway through the novel, Dai and the Narrator have an intense fight which results in Dai attacking the Narrator. Subsequently, they break off their relationship. As the Narrator is getting rid of all the items Dai gave her, she considers a list of things that she misses about Dai:

My fingers on the dimples in her cheeks, and her smile as the dimples grow deeper; her sadness, and the troubled expression on her face when she gets sad. I miss us when we are going to sleep ... each of us looking at the other and the world entirely empty but for us. I miss her voice. I miss more the hoarseness of her voice the moment she wakes up.... I miss her finger in my mouth, I miss her pushing her nose into the inside of my elbow and sniffing me – but I don't miss the heat of our bodies together. Worse than this, I miss all that we did not do together, all that we could have done but we forgot or put off. (al-Herz, 173-174)

Engaged in memories of intimate moments and sensorial feelings, the Narrator is enfolded into a sexuality-assemblage. Here, it is important to remember that not all sexuality-assemblages are characterized by a sex act. Sexuality as a potential force is always circulating, and thus any moment may assemble into a sexuality-assemblage. Furthermore, this passage expresses sensual and intimate moments with Dai, which in turn are sexual by nature of the relationship that they shared.

In analyzing this moment, one should remember that the sexuality-assemblage follows movements that are both molar and molecular in nature, given that, as noted above, Deleuze and

Guattari contend that assemblages integrate deterritorializations which are molecular and traverse molar alignments of reterritorialization. The beginning of the passage expresses a molecular assemblage as a rhizomatic, fluid, unsignified series of bodies: her body of memories, the temporal shifting of past-present-future, cheeks, fingers, and arms, the emotion of sadness, beds, and sound. The Narrator makes no attempt to codify these bodies into any coherent meaning, and as such, they are fully open to any possibility that might have in the past, and could still in the future, deterritorialize into a different kind of sexual becoming for the Narrator. However, the end of the passage also signifies a reterritorialization of the assemblage as a molar sexuality-assemblage. The longing that she feels for Dai, the feeling of loss over all the things that once were, is dampened momentarily by the Narrator's statement that she does not miss the "heat of their bodies," their sexual acts, their physical experiences that disrupt prescribed social and sexual expectations. Here, the molar lines of social structuring move toward closing off the potentials opened by the molecular becomings. Yet, just as quickly, she continues that worst of all, she misses all the things they did not do together, which suggests any possibility of future sexuality-assemblages, which might include their "heated bodies" once more. The sexuality-assemblage is always moving back and forth from molecular to molar and visa versa, which means that even as some potentials for sexual experiences are closed off for the Narrator, others are always opening up.

A similar passage holds many of the same markers of a sexuality-assemblage that is both molecular and molar in nature. As the Narrator is throwing items away, she recounts:

I erased her from my address list, and I tore up the letters which she had slipped from time to time into my locker at college. Her gifts settled into the depths of the trashcan, except for her last gift, a small pillow cushion in the shape of a heart, red; at the center was written I LOVE YOU in English. I was in need of something shouting into my face like this, in big letters – no, in huge letters. I was in need of a single thread of memory that would not become frail, that would not break. (al-Herz, 173)

The Narrator insists on keeping the pillow as a reminder to stay away from Dai, which suggests a potential that the Narrator will go back to her. Why would she need an unbreakable reminder “shouting in her face” if the possibility of returning to Dai was not always under the surface? While through the molar, demarcated assemblage the Narrator is pulled to erase Dai and all her attendant pieces from the present, the molecular potential of past and future returnings (to memories and new possibilities) is an all-too-real force for the Narrator, such that she is simultaneously pulled toward that potential even as she works to stamp it out.

These passages show how sexuality-assemblages may be both rhizomatic and codified simultaneously. The codification (or naming and organizing) of rhizomatic and fluid sexual encounters are a powerful byproduct of molar sexuality-assemblage. The continual codification of sexual encounters under molar assemblages can result in a sexual identity. Jasbir Puar (2013) discusses the way sexual identity becomes a habit in her article “Homonationalism As Assemblage: Viral Travels, Affective Sexualities.” Puar argues that:

we can think of (sexual) identity, and our attachments to identity, as a process involving an intensification of habituation. That is to say, identity is the intensification of bodily habit, a ‘returning forward’ of the body’s quotidian affective sensorial rhythms and vibrations to a disciplinary model of the subject.... [and] entails a certain stoppage of where the body once was to reconcile where the body must go. (Puar, “Homonationalism” 41)

In this way, sexuality expressed in rhizomatic molecular assemblages may become reduced to a finite set of possibilities that must fall within the codification of sexual identities. Intensities, relations, and sensations, Puar claims, are forced to “‘make sense’ to submit to these master scripts either as a backformation responding to multiplicity or as a demand to subsume it to the master script and foreclose that multiplicity” (Puar, “Homonationalism,” 41). Within such habituations of sexuality, all potentials and multiplicities of the molecular sexuality-assemblage

are narrowed to “submit” to the master scripts of sexuality-as-identity that includes political and societal demands.

The struggles that the Narrator faces because her sexual experiences are compelled to submit to these “master scripts” and form a stable identity, even as she experiences molecular potentials, are well expressed in her experiences with Umar and Dai. Throughout the novel, Umar is described as the Narrator’s closest friend, and at one point in the novel he remarks that he considers the Narrator like a sister (al-Herz, 248). He is also the only person in the novel who knows about the Narrator’s relationship with Dai, though she tells Umar about the relationship after it has ended. The novel frames Umar more like family than a potential sex partner, so when the final chapter of the novel ends with Umar and the Narrator having sex and vowing to stay together, the scene feels disingenuous, not because Umar is a man but because the Narrator’s overwhelming love for him seemingly appears out of nowhere in the narrative context. The Narrator’s lover/partner relationship with Umar is most understandable through his framing as the safe and stable option, something that social pressure and internal fears might steer the Narrator toward. Indeed, Umar is kind, understanding, and already a part of the family, in a sense. The safety net that Umar provides for the Narrator is significant within the social context of the novel, which encourages characters like Hiba and Dareen to marry men who have good jobs and can provide stable home lives. That safety net is equally significant through the novel’s construction of Umar as the alternate of Dai, who is characterized as volatile and unpredictable.

The novel shows several times how the Narrator trusts Umar with information she does not share with anyone else. As mentioned earlier, the Narrator tells Umar about her relationship with Dai. Umar also knows about her epilepsy (al-Herz, 104-105), something none of her other lovers know about. That the Narrator tells him her two closest kept secrets shows that she views

him as uniquely trustworthy. She also describes Umar as “a fact that virtual reality did not demolish, nor did distances, nor my fear” (al-Herz, 294). Umar is a real, unchanging, and solid partner, something none of her other partners have shown themselves to be. Indeed, each of her previous partners have a certain characteristic of uncertainty and absence: the relationship with Rayyan is marked by a physical absence, the relationship with Dareen is always shadowed by Nadia, and the relationship with Dai is fraught with precarity. As a result, the sexuality-assemblages involving Umar and the Narrator are more likely to fall under the gridding lines of habituation and codification, since Umar is the more stable option, as well as the partner who is most like social, heteronormative standards.

The appeal of Umar’s stability for the Narrator exists in part because she is so frequently met with incoherency and unknown potentials. From the disconnections between herself and her body, to her ambiguous relationships, perhaps what she is seeking by the end of the novel is the possibility of something more solid, especially when her seizures are becoming more frequent and more intense. In a conversation with Dareen, the Narrator hints at the pressure for stability and conformity, saying to Dareen, “Is it bad for me to say to you what I am about to say? That what I really yearn for in you is a man – a man who will never show up” (al-Herz, 194). The moment illuminates the pressure the Narrator feels to find a man, because of the prescribed social norms of marriage and heteronormative coupling, as well as the economic and social stability a man would offer. While the Narrator prior to and after this statement continues to desire and engage in same-gender sexual practices, she is none-the-less pressured to “yearn for a man.” The sexuality-assemblage’s shifting of molar and molecular flows is present in her admission. The pressure to submit to a heterosexual identity and want a man shifts the assemblage toward molar codification. However, the Narrator only wishes Dareen was a man



because she wants to be with her, or with women. The molecular potential of her sexual desire for Dareen allows the Narrator to admit to those desires, which might take her to new sexual experiences, but also more relationships that are ambiguous and possibly unstable. The molecular sexuality-assemblage formations carry her along those lines of precarity and potential, even as her fears of instability and illness reterritorialize those formations toward molar significations of more stable and permanent options, like Umar.

By contrast, the Narrator's relationship with Dai carries many markers of the fluid, undetermined, multiplicitous nature of molecular sexuality-assemblages. From the very beginning of her discussions about Dai, the Narrator thinks of her in a rhizomatic kind of way. As the Narrator describes, "[Dai] did not enter through a door, which would have meant my sending her out through another. Perhaps she came from somewhere overhead, sliding down the banister or hanging from the ceiling. Something did compel me to swing my gaze in a particular direction: above" (al-Herz, 8). Visually, molar sexuality-assemblages are characterized by grid lines that divide and organize, while molecular sexuality-assemblages are movements that cross and move around those grid lines. Dai does not follow the grid lines, entering and exiting through a door. Instead, she comes "from somewhere overhead," seemingly falling or sliding into the Narrator's life in a molecular cross movement.

Similarly, the Narrator describes how her relationship with Dai is ambiguous and difficult to define. She says at one point, "I had no desire to play this game any more, the game of making assumptions about what this might possibly be, this thing which is so hard to explain and which exceeds my powers of understanding" (al-Herz, 95). All of the descriptors in the Narrator's statement point to the uncertainty and instability of their relationship: it is game-like (childish), hard to explain (un-definable), beyond her power of understanding (ambiguous). The un-

definable quality of their relationship leads it to open molecular potentials, as molecular sexuality-assemblages are undefined or uncoded. Yet, at the same time, the lack of definition in their relationship is what makes the Narrator feel insecure about them, and it is one of the reasons she leaves Dai.

A scene from the pool party Dai and the Narrator attend is another moment which displays molecular potential. Although all sexuality-assemblages have a molecular potential, this scene carries greater weight than others. When the Narrator and Dai are at the pool party, Dai does something that is totally unexpected for the Narrator; she tells the Narrator, “I love you” (al-Herz, 144). The Narrator is shocked and thinks, “Throughout the whole of this time, we had never once said to each other, I love you. I can almost, almost believe that it was never there in any of the plans or expectations that either of us had; it was so *not there* that I would not have dared to put it on the list of possibilities that I was hoping or waiting for” (al-Herz, 144). The impossibility of them saying “I love you” means the Narrator is totally taken off guard by Dai’s admission. Yet, she is also thrilled to hear it. In response, the Narrator smiles at Dai, but thinks her smile is a stupid reaction. She reconsiders: “I needed to rework my response very fast, and so I hauled her away from the swimming pool. I did not wait for us to be alone somewhere empty and enclosed, though.... Then I caught her lips, breaking up a half sentence she was about to finish, my head going round and round as we fell dizzily into a prolonged kiss” (al-Herz, 145). In the moment of their public kiss, the molecular sexuality-assemblage crosses molar lines of signification that might compel them to submit to certain societal expectations. While the pool party is a queer space open to female same-gender relationships, the public kiss still breaks across the Narrator’s own limitations. She and Dai have never kissed in public before. In the moment, coming together through a sexuality-assemblage of the energy of the party, the

Narrator's "wide open" (al-Herz, 142) expectations, the "I love you" admission, their emotions, their bodies, and so on, the Narrator follows an unexpected and undirected course to a kiss and a public display.

Almost immediately after this encounter though, Dai's volatile nature erupts in an unexpected way that upsets the Narrator. She describes that,

When I got up from where Dai and I sat and turned my back to her, she pinched my bottom. I all but turned and slapped her. With a single stupid and mean move, she had just blasted apart all that had happened the moment before. She had crushed my desire to love her, torpedoed the pure memory of that *I love you* instant, done away with the flash of absolute contentment granted me by that moment between us. (al-Herz, 146)

The Narrator feels embarrassed by Dai's action toward her, considers it mean, and instantly the Narrator feels all the happiness of the previous moments falling away. Just as the potential of their encounter had opened up, it closes off again.

This kind of volatility that exists in Dai, and the ways it may manifest in violence, are what drive the Narrator away from Dai by the end of their relationship. However, the Narrator's desires also unexpectedly pull her back. The last time the Narrator and Dai see each other, the Narrator goes to Dai's house in a visit that is totally unplanned. It has been months since they have seen or spoken to each other, and when the Narrator first goes into Dai's house, she is unsure of what to say. While waiting for Dai in her bedroom, the Narrator goes over what she might say to Dai in the coming moments. She starts off thinking,

I'm here because...I need you, I mean I miss you! Don't refuse to see me. I hope my timing isn't bad, maybe you have other obligations. As soon as she was standing in front of me, I couldn't say a word; my language was entirely gone, and my ability to take any sort of stance was gone, too. I had not prepared for this, I hadn't practiced for it, it just came as pure need, and I cannot always control my needs. (al-Herz, 278)

For long moments after this passage, neither of them say anything and just stare back at each other. The unmarked flow of potential in the moment circulates here. There is no defined

direction within the encounter, for why the Narrator shows up, what to say, what to do. The molecular sexuality-assemblage is open to any possibility for them: they might reconcile, might have another fight, might cry, might have sex, or leave saying nothing to each other. The moment, though only temporarily, is pure potential. Although the Narrator and Dai do not reconcile, and the Narrator claims she and Dai do not see each other after that encounter, that the Narrator returns to Dai at all after months of no communication, totally unexpectedly, suggestions the pull the Narrator feels toward Dai. Perhaps that is why the Narrator keeps the I LOVE YOU pillow after their breakup. She needs something to remind her of the reason she left Dai, of how Dai can be jealous and petty and turn violent. Because the deterritorializing molecular potential of returning to Dai is ever-present, always ready to cross the molar lines of signification to a different kind of becoming.

#### 4 **CONCLUSION**

In the afterword of *The Others*, titled “Translator’s Afterword: *The Others* of Saudi Arabia,” the anonymous translator makes a series of claims about what the novel is about. Among the translator’s comments is a statement that, “If same-sex emotional and physical relationships are fulfilling for some young women in the novel, they’re also suggested to be a substitute for heterosexual romance in a social context where gender segregation in public remains the norm” (al-Herz, 318). I have argued that the novel portrays something altogether different. Even though the novel ends with the Narrator in a heterosexual relationship with Umar, I do not read this moment as the novel validating something about heterosexuality. *The Others* is not about Umar and the heterosexual partnership he offers the Narrator. The story spends all but the last chapter on the Narrator’s relationships with Dai (most dominantly), Dareen, and Rayyan,

lovers who represent alternate kinds of relationships. In this way, the novel becomes a story of Narrator's relationships with *the others* and Umar. In a meta-narrative sense, the novel is about the Narrator's *others*, Dai and Dareen and Rayyan, who disrupt and challenge the social norms and exist in unstable times and in unstable ways. Umar, as the anti-thesis of those things, cannot fit within a narrative space created for *others*.

The otherness of the novel is expressed not just through the characters, though. The shifting temporality and alternate queer time, the unique and unconventional relationships, and the exploration of the self and subject-hood all contribute to the construction of a novel that destabilizes notions of immutable self-narration and a unified subject-self. While one reading of the novel might claim that the Narrator's "lesbian" experiences are a temporary substitute for heterosexual coupling, I would disagree. I do not think it is possible for the Narrator to replace one sexual identity with another when there is limited availability for a stable sexual identity to begin with. The novel favors ambiguity and fluidity in a way that suggests the impossibility, at least in moments, of static and signified time, self, and identity. As a result of the novel's fluid characteristics, sexuality-assemblage is a viable framework for exploring how the Narrator's sexuality exists in *The Others*. Even when the novel ends with the Narrator and Umar in a relationship, there are no declarations of a sexual identity. None of the Narrator's relationships are made to represent a specific meaning about her. Through the lens of sexuality-assemblage, those relationships are able to remain experiences with lovers that change over time, unsigned and open.

The usefulness of thinking through an alternative to sexual identity is that it broadens the ways that people may interact and form bonds with one another. If an intimate bond with someone, a relationship, or a sexual encounter do not have to always mark out something

specific about *who you are*, then the ways that we engage with each other in the world can be more expansive and less defined by parameters that seek to dictate what is and is not allowed within sexual couplings and intimate spaces. While a sexual identity is beneficial and liberating from some individuals, it is not the only way that sexuality may be felt and expressed. The Narrator illustrates this point well, as her sexuality is expressed more in terms of desires and situational experiences. The power of sexuality-assemblage for her, is that it gives her access to alternative paths for being sexual and experiencing her sexuality, whether she chooses to take them or not.

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